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## Chapter Six

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### The Final Offensive

The final offensive—which would strike at the Siegfried Line, and, if successful, press forward across the Rhine River—could be expected to differ considerably from either the Lorraine Campaign or the Battle for France. First and foremost, General Weyland's XIX TAC possessed important advantages not previously available. Above all, the command could rely on overwhelming air superiority—far more than at any time during operations in Northwest Europe. Weyland's aerial force numbered nearly 400 fighter-bombers in this Third Army sector alone. Intelligence estimated the *Luftwaffe* possessed at most only 700 fighters arrayed against all of the Allied armies and air forces deployed along the German border in the west. (Nazi war records later proved this Allied estimate to have been remarkably accurate.) Because of severe fuel constraints and the *Luftwaffe*'s large-scale redeployment to the eastern front at the end of 1944, the Germans stationed only 600 single-engine fighters in the west. Moreover, not until early March 1945, when the Allies pressed their drive to the Rhine, did the overall German sortie rate increase from the late January figure of 250 to 300–400 per day, weather permitting. Even a major effort to protect airfields with turbojet aircraft and overworking Ju 87 aircraft in missions at night failed to slow the inexorable Allied advance.<sup>1</sup> With uncontested air superiority, Weyland could be expected to devote the bulk of his flying effort to the second- and third-priority aerial missions of interdiction and close air support, respectively.

The ground situation seemed equally favorable. After the Ardennes defeat, Third Army intelligence officers learned that units from both General von Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army and General Brandenberger's Seventh Army were moved to reinforce the eastern front and bolster German forces defending the Cologne area where the main Allied thrust was expected. General Patton's intelligence section predicted that enemy forces facing them in the Eifel region amounted to no more than five American-strength divisions.<sup>2</sup> In addition to numerical superiority, the Third Army–XIX TAC air-ground team also possessed the advantage of experience gained during six months of combat in all kinds of weather and terrain in northern Europe. It could be expected to react confidently to the challenges of fighting under conditions of mobile and static warfare, especially against a rapidly weakening enemy.

Nevertheless, the Siegfried Line defenses of concrete bunkers and pill-boxes presented formidable targets for fighter-bombers. The airmen could



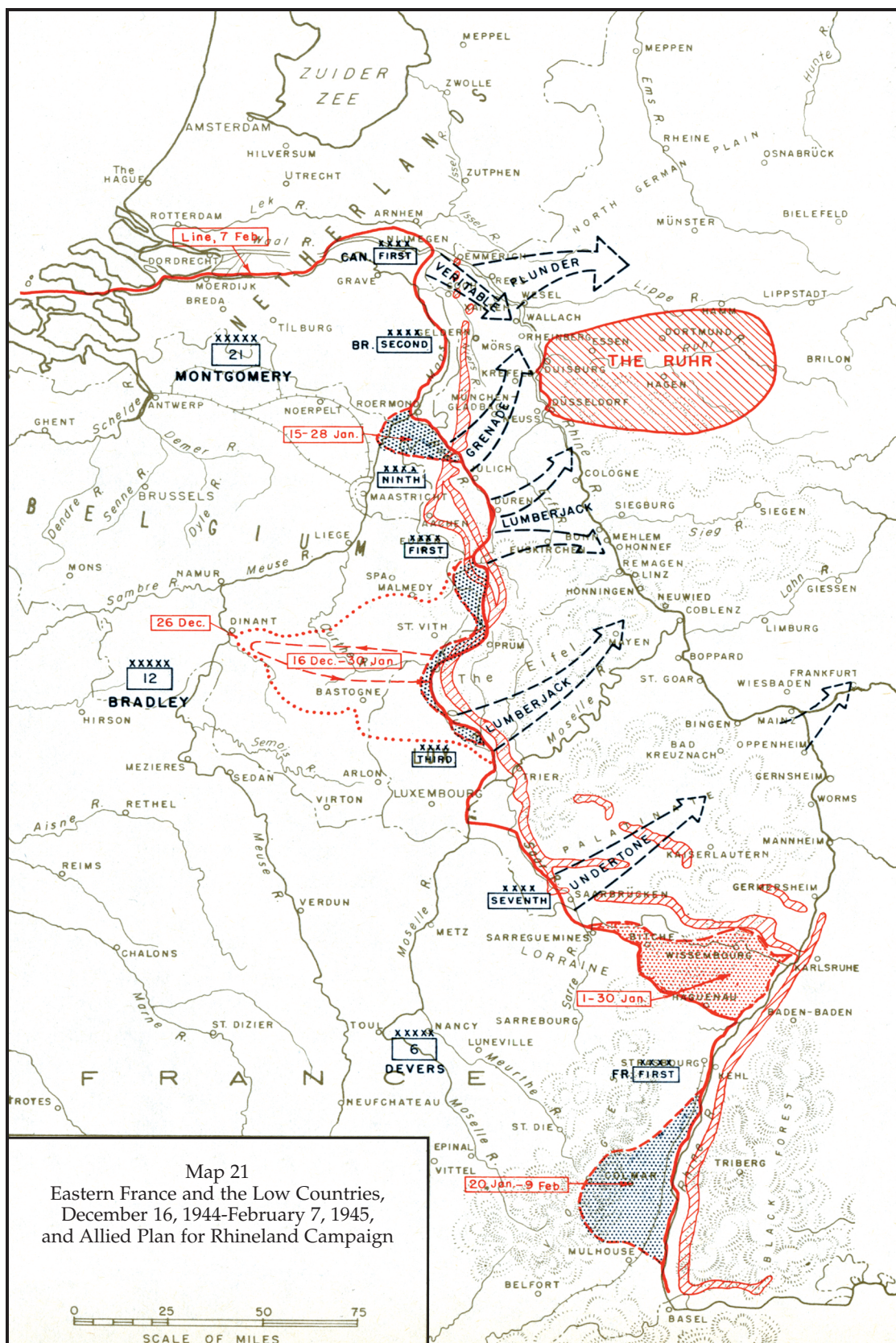
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expect little cooperation from the weather as the Eifel region was noted for its wretched winters. Weyland also knew, in the event of a breakthrough of the Siegfried Line, he would again face the formidable tasks of moving supplies and establishing forward airstrips rapidly enough to maintain pace with Patton's armored spearheads. All the while, the air-ground team would contend with an overarching Allied strategy that assigned only a supporting role to the Third Army with concomitant priorities in the climactic drive against Nazi Germany.

With the Ardennes emergency officially ended on January 28, 1945, General Eisenhower and his advisors returned to their grand plan for breaching the Siegfried Line, hurdling the Rhine River barrier and plunging Allied armor into the heart of Germany.<sup>3</sup> The Supreme Allied Commander favored advancing to the Rhine along a broad front, then holding at the river with a small force while the British 21st Army Group pressed the main Allied assault north of the Ruhr industrial area, under the direction of doughty Field Marshal Montgomery. A secondary attack led by General Patton's Third Army would follow to the south in the Frankfurt area. When the British and American chiefs of staff met on the island of Malta in late January and early February 1945, they endorsed Eisenhower's plan, but only after the Supreme Commander allayed British fears that he might wait to cross the Rhine until the entire west bank had been cleared. Moreover, to avoid unwanted procrastination mounting the offensive in the north, General Eisenhower promised to reinforce Montgomery's 21st Army Group with sizeable American air and ground units so it might be ready to cross the Rhine "in force as soon as possible."<sup>4</sup>

Although Allied leaders had their eyes on a northernmost Rhine crossing from the Low Countries, the immediate challenge in early February 1945, was to overcome the still formidable Siegfried Line defenses in the Rhineland. To achieve this objective, SHAEF developed plans for a series of consecutive Allied attacks from north to south that would bring the armies to the banks of the Rhine (**Map 21**). The main assault, termed Operation Veritable, would be led by Montgomery opposite the Ruhr. To give the offensive more punch, Eisenhower gave Montgomery, who had temporary command of General Simpson's Ninth Army since the Battle of the Bulge, units from Hodges's First and Patton's Third Armies.

General Bradley received permission to allow Hodges and Patton to continue attacking in the Eifel region only until February 1. Then priority for supplies and personnel would again shift to Montgomery's area to meet Operation Veritable's deadline for the attack on the eighth. Once the British field marshal's forces reached the Rhine and began preparations for the crossing, General Bradley could resume his Eifel offensive, now termed Operation Lumberjack. Shortly thereafter, General Devers's 6th Army Group in the south would launch an assault in the Palatinate, Operation Undertone. Despite Eisenhower's assurance to British leaders that Montgomery would lead the way, his broad-front strategy, which called for all Allied armies to



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close to the Rhine before attempting to cross that barrier, seemed as much intact as ever.

Under the SHAEF plan, Montgomery would cross the Rhine to the north in the Wesel area as soon as possible and proceed along the main invasion route north of the Ruhr, sweeping across the north German plain (**Map 21**). He would be followed by the two American army groups, which would make secondary crossings in the Mainz-Frankfurt region and attack northeast through the so-called Frankfurt-Kassel Corridor. Once the two Allied forces linked up east of the Ruhr, Germany's industrial heartland would be encircled, and all hope of forestalling the Allied offensive eliminated. Understandably, Hitler appreciated the vital importance of the Ruhr, and the growing Allied threat served to reinforce his natural inclination to defend the area west of the Rhine with fanatical determination. Closing the Rhine would not be easy and the vagaries of winter weather, short supplies, and contemporary technology complicated the assignment.<sup>5</sup>

## Operational Challenges and New Tactics

The need for improved accuracy in bombing and for bomb damage assessment was underscored in an incident involving destruction of the Bullay Bridge over the Mosel River. For months this structure eluded the best efforts of medium bombers and fighter-bombers to destroy it. Then, on February 10, 1945, a squadron from XIX TAC's 368th Fighter Group scored direct hits with several 500-lb. bombs. Despite Ninth Air Force's initial skepticism, reconnaissance later confirmed that the center span had collapsed into the river. At this point, an ebullient General Weyland could not resist sending photographs to General Anderson, commander of the IX Bombardment Division, with a suggestion that any targets he found too difficult for his medium bombers be referred to XIX TAC fighter-bombers. In an equally mordant reply, General Anderson asserted that his bombers had weakened the bridge for Weyland's "pea shooters," and he had photographs to prove it. Operational research specialists, he told the XIX TAC commander, had shown that fighter claims for bridges and rail cuts were actually inflated 70 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Later that month Nicholas M. Smith, chief of XIX TAC's newly formed operational research section, considered methods employed in the aerial bombing of bridges. He analyzed the probability of destroying double-trussed bridges with various size bombs and different fuzes. Initially he thought that bridge targets might require bombs too heavy for fighter-bombers; further study, however, suggested these aircraft might have better luck with the smaller bombs using different fuzing. Smith's analysis demonstrated that the probability of destroying trussed bridges with their numerous small redundant trusses increased with a larger number of smaller bombs fuzed contrary to the

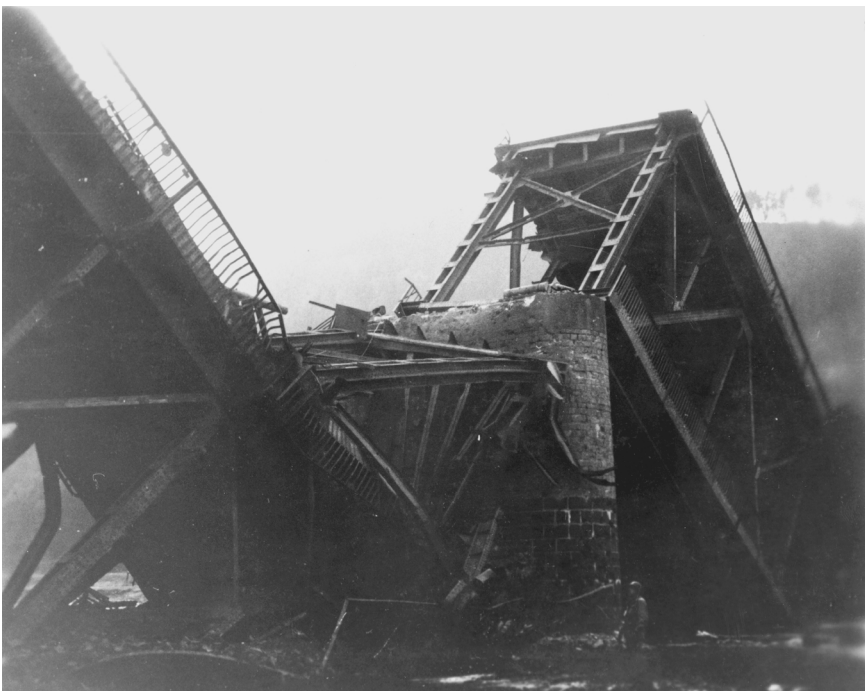


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parameters used by the medium bombers. The bridge study was one of several important technical investigations undertaken by Smith and an associate, radar specialist Arnold C. McLean, to improve the command's operational performance.<sup>7</sup> Two other studies carried out by the command's operational research section in the late winter and early spring also deserve special attention. One involved an intensive effort to produce a bomb strike camera, and the other to develop an accurate blind bombing radar system. Their stories illustrate the promise, as well as the limitations, of technology applied at the front.

The bomb strike camera offered the prospect of improvements in bomb damage assessment and bombing accuracy, which might end the turmoil over pilot claims. Ninth Air Force had been interested in such a project since the late fall when the studies mentioned by General Anderson indicated that fighter-bombers made one rail cut in every eight or nine sorties rather than one in every three as claimed by the pilots.<sup>8</sup> Smith, the XIX TAC research chief, worked closely with Col. George W. Goddard in Ninth Air Force's Office of Technical Service after the Ardennes Offensive to develop more effective mounting arrangements and test various oblique cameras on P-47 aircraft. The key problem proved to be finding a workable mounting system. Hanging a

**The Bullay Bridge, destroyed by the direct hits of the  
368th Fighter Group**



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K-25 short focal-length, wide-angle, rear-facing camera from a wing support had to be abandoned after tests by pilots from the 371st Fighter Group showed that its field of view remained too small. The pilots also complained about the external mount and the need to fly straight and level after hitting the target. A belly camera mount experiment proved equally unrewarding, and research and testing continued throughout the spring.

In early May 1945, with the war nearly over, Smith and a XIX TAC intelligence officer exchanged visits with their counterparts in the Mediterranean theater where fighter-bombers successfully used an oblique camera mounted in a faired compartment in front of the left bomb pylon. At the same time, Colonel Goddard began experimenting with 70-mm cameras mounted in split vertical pairs. They were activated by the bomb release mechanism in order to obtain photographs in conjunction with the bomb bursts. Although the scientists could not produce an effective bomb strike camera system before the end of the European Campaign, their work continued and the outlook appeared promising.

The other major project studied by the operational research section during the last offensive focused on the SCR-584 ground-based blind bombing system discussed earlier in Chapter 5. According to conventional wisdom, when modified for close control, the SCR-584 could serve as an effective blind bombing system during important operations like the Ardennes counteroffensive. Its radar equipment would position the fighter-bomber over the target with sufficient precision to bomb effectively through cloud cover or at night.<sup>9</sup> Such was not the case, however, and like the search for a good bomb strike camera, accurate blind bombing remained out of reach throughout the campaign. As has so often occurred with new technology, the SCR-584 story is a fascinating tale of a technical system that never quite lived up to the initial predictions of its developers.<sup>10</sup>

When, in early November 1944, the XIX TAC received the first SCR-584 radar system, a BACU, officials decided to use it mainly as a navigational device to position aircraft close enough over a target to enable the pilot to acquire it visually. They assigned this unit and subsequent SCR-584 flying control units to the tactical air liaison officer at army corps headquarters, which had good land line communications. The system's first mission did not occur until December 2, and by December 10 it had controlled only ten missions, all navigational. At that time, a second unit had been installed near Metz, which was moved north to cover the Bulge in early January 1945. Between December 4, 1944, and January 10, 1945, it controlled a total of 16 separate missions, only two of which represented blind bombing runs. In fact, of the 26 missions controlled by the SCR-584 during this period, 10 could not be completed because of controller error; 14 of the remaining 16 proved to be navigational, not blind bombing, missions. Moreover, the average error in positioning the aircraft accurately amounted to an unacceptably high 3,500 feet.

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In early January 1945, the command decided to employ the MEW and director post radars for close navigational control and to use the modified SCR-584 for blind bombing almost exclusively. Ninth Air Force, which strongly supported efforts to improve the system, wanted each tactical air command to have its scientific-military team work independently to improve system accuracy. It seems that the Ninth Air Force also received motivation from reports compiled by other tactical air forces that indicated better performance than the Ninth had been able to achieve. General Lee, Ninth Air Force deputy for operations, became concerned over statements made by General Saville, commander of the XII TAC. General Lee told General Weyland in a January 5 letter that Saville claimed aircraft in his command used the SCR-584 to bomb accurately through overcast within 100 yards of friendly troops without fear of hitting them. Given the difficulty of achieving this kind of accuracy even in daylight under optimum conditions, Weyland and his Ninth Air Force colleagues were more than a little skeptical. Yet the Saville report focused attention on improving the system, and testing continued from January until the end of the campaign.<sup>11</sup>

Upon investigation, McLean, the command's radar expert, determined that equipment limitations and inadequate controller procedures made it impossible to develop accurate control of aircraft for blind bombing with great accuracy. McLean introduced radar siting procedures that called for survey measurements to obtain proper station grid coordinates and antenna alignment. He also instructed controllers to compute range and bearing information mathematically rather than rely on large-scale maps. In all, the research technician discovered 12 common problems associated with the two types of plotting boards and three methods of blind-level bombing in use. Most could be minimized through an extensive training program for controllers. Indeed, SCR-584 system accuracy improved considerably by the time a third control unit arrived on February 27.<sup>12</sup>

After evaluating all available bombing data, McLean reported an average bombing error of 1,745 feet for the command. He advised Ninth Air Force that current accuracy and the size of bomb patterns made it unsafe to bomb any closer than 2,000 yards, or slightly more than a mile from front line troops. In early May 1945, after collecting reports from the other tactical air commands, Ninth Air Force research officials concluded, despite Saville's claims to the contrary, that it found no appreciable difference among the three commands in operational techniques and equipment used or in the results attained. As for other commands, Ninth Air Force consultant R. W. Larson disputed figures used by the British Second TAF specialists, who asserted that safe blind bombing could be done within a thousand yards of friendly troops. He also reported that Mediterranean theater testing now indicated that accuracies of 500 feet could be attained, but the authorities there had not yet issued a formal report.<sup>13</sup>

By war's end, Ninth Air Force recommended using the SCR-584 only for navigational purposes, not to direct blind bombing missions. Officials nonetheless expected much progress in future blind bombing through the use of radio



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beacons, or identification friend or foe (IFF) transponders, some already installed in General Quesada's aircraft as the fighting came to a close. The Ninth also directed that controller training continue after the war. Although important breakthroughs would have to await further developments in technology, the efforts of the airmen, scientists, and engineers represented an important element in the program to improve combat effectiveness for tactical air power.<sup>14</sup>

Like the Lorraine experience, static warfare along the Siegfried Line in February 1945, nonetheless offered XIX TAC several advantages that mitigated poor flying weather and heavily defended targets. The command now could test the cumbersome, ground-based SCR-584 blind bombing radar system. Indeed, communications in general remained uniformly excellent throughout the month and into March because neither the headquarters nor any of the flying groups changed station. In fact, only one fighter group, the 367th (which subsequently again changed locations on March 15), redeployed from St. Dizier to Conflans, bringing it 60 miles closer to the Third Army front lines.

Other operational considerations benefitted from the static situation as well. For example, flying distance from air bases in France to the target areas, normally less than 50 miles, increased loiter times over selected targets. The stable front and well-established bases also made it easier for the command to solve logistic challenges. By mid-February, however, the XIX TAC's heavy flying commitment threatened shortages of both 500-lb. general-purpose bombs and .50-caliber ammunition. Because 500-lb. bomb stocks could not be replaced immediately, armorers used a substitute, RDX Composition-B, a British-made, high-explosive bomb consisting of a mixture of TNT and wax. More popular with the aircrews and ground forces, however, was the M-47 100-lb. white phosphorous bomb, first used by the command at this time. Its 50-foot burst and shower of burning particles made it a superb antipersonnel incendiary, and its smoke provided airmen a good protective screen against flak. Although attacks west of the Rhine at Freillingen and Mayen during February produced excellent results, transportation problems also affected the supply of white phosphorous bombs, and the command decided to conserve a minimum for special missions.<sup>15</sup>

High consumption of the universally used .50-caliber ammunition created greater concern when priorities in ground transport were claimed by Montgomery's forces. The command increasingly relied on air resupply to alleviate the deficit both in February and in March 1945, when the situation again became acute with the advent of more mobile ground operations. By mid-March, ammunition stocks were nearly exhausted. On March 18, in fact, the 371st Fighter Group alone fired a record 300,000 rounds while flying in close support of XX Corps. In response to the ammunition crisis, the IX Air Force Service Command flew in 2 million rounds to the 1907th Ordnance Depot Company. Even though the command stressed conservation of ammunition, it could not hope to reduce strafing operations when the war became



**P-51 Mustangs of the 354th Fighter Group**

more mobile and fighter-bombers often flew with reduced bombloads. However, at no time in February 1945 or later did ordnance shortages adversely affect flying operations.<sup>16</sup>

The relatively static situation in February eased the burden of aircraft conversion for two XIX TAC groups. With earlier experience to follow, the command had no trouble providing the 367th Fighter Group with P-47s in place of P-38s, and the 354th Fighter Group with P-51s in place of P-47s. In fact, both conversions occurred faster than the 354th's conversion from P-51s to Thunderbolts back in November 1944.<sup>17</sup> For some time the command had considered standardizing its fighter-bomber force by reequipping its lone Lightning group with the more durable P-47s. Despite the P-38's superior low-level speed and maneuverability, the command preferred the Thunderbolt for dive-bombing and close support in the final offensive. The reconversion of the 354th Fighter Group from P-47s to P-51s no doubt became a consideration as well. Beginning in December 1944, each of the 367th Fighter Group's three P-38 squadrons had four P-47s assigned. When no more arrived in January 1945, group members thought there would be no conversion. But on February 11, the group's 392d Fighter Squadron received 13 P-47s and by the sixteenth, was flying combat missions with the new aircraft. The remaining two squadrons became operational after only four and three days, respectively. By February 26, the 367th Fighter Group operated as a fully equipped Thunderbolt outfit.<sup>18</sup>

The 354th Fighter Group's conversion proved equally speedy, but perhaps more interesting, in view of the problems attendant on its original conversion to P-47s. According to the group historian, when the P-51 news reached the 354th Fighter Group's headquarters on February 4, it proved to be the "signal for the beginning of a celebration unapproached in spontaneity...by any previous reveries of the Group and it lasted unabated for two days." The Mustangs began arriving on February 10, and the group celebrated

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its return, or reconversion, to P-51s on February 16 by downing four Bf 109s over Trier and Oberlahnstein without sustaining a loss.<sup>19</sup>

The group historian thought the P-51s returned because the command needed a superior, long-range fighter that could perform counterair and interdiction missions well into Germany. At the same time, however, the AAF in Europe now had received sufficient P-51Ds to make the conversion possible *and* provide needed replacements. Whether the Pioneer Mustang group performed more effectively with P-51s is unclear. Loss rates, for example, were high if not higher during comparable periods when the group flew P-47s. On the other hand, comparisons are difficult. In spite of flying close support missions on February 16, the 354th Fighter Group now assumed the more traditional fighter responsibility of fulfilling air superiority and long-range interdiction requirements. With the return of the Mustangs, the group "started right away to climb back to its own proud place in the sun."<sup>20</sup>

## Into the Siegfried Line

At the end of the Ardennes operation in late February, the Third Army-XIX TAC team returned to the question: how best to break through the Siegfried Line. The theatrical General Patton was not at all content to end his pursuit and pin down German troops in the Eifel while the cautious Field Marshal Montgomery claimed center stage in the Allied advance. He preferred to give "active defense" the widest possible interpretation. Because General Bradley interpreted General Eisenhower's order of February 1 as authorizing Patton's army to "continue the probing attacks now in progress," General Middleton's VIII Corps could maintain its offensive at the German border (**Map 20**).<sup>21</sup> Patton increased Middleton's responsibilities during a meeting on February 3 with his corps commanders and General Weyland. He explained that VIII Corps would protect First Army's right flank as ordered by SHAEF, and also launch a major assault on the West Wall, or Siegfried Line, with its objective being the capture of the town of Prüm. This would be coordinated with General Eddy's XII Corps, which would attack through the Echternach region, the old southern hinge of the Bulge, on February 6 or 7; cross the Sauer River; and move northeast to take the major road center of Bitburg. With both Prüm and Bitburg in Third Army hands, Patton hoped to convince Bradley and Eisenhower to allow Third Army to continue attacking eastward to the Rhine. By launching the Bitburg Offensive without permission, Patton knew he would be "taking one of the longest chances of [his] chancy career." He informed his corps commanders that the offensive would end four days later, on February 10, 1945, if sufficient progress toward the two towns had not been made.<sup>22</sup>

Following the February 3 planning conference, General Weyland joined the other TAC commanders at Ninth Air Force headquarters to allocate the air

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effort for the upcoming offensives. To provide Ninth Army with sufficient tactical air support in the Aachen region, General Nugent's XXIX TAC received units from the IX and XIX TACs. As a result, on February 8 Weyland lost two of his longest serving fighter groups, the 405th Raiders and 406th Tiger Tamers, leaving him with four fighter groups—the 354th, 362d, 367th, and 368th—until February 15, when the 371st Fighter Group returned from the XII TAC to help support Third Army's increasingly "aggressive defense." Although General Weyland had requested the 358th Fighter Group, the 371st soon distinguished itself in combat operations as the most efficient in the command.<sup>23</sup> To support Third Army's drive through the West Wall and on to the Rhine, XIX TAC now had five fighter-bomber groups, totaling 225 aircraft, as well as the 425th Night Fighter Squadron and the 10th Reconnaissance Group. Like Third Army, Allied leaders reduced XIX TAC's forces with the northward shift in their combat priorities.

For both Third Army and XIX TAC, the February 1945 assault on the Siegfried Line by VIII and XII Corps troops brought back bittersweet memories of the Lorraine Campaign, in which bad weather, formidable terrain, swollen rivers, reduced forces, and stiff resistance thwarted the progress of the air-ground team. Both army corps forces had to cross rivers now swollen to twice their normal widths and press forward into the cliffs of the West Wall defenses. Moreover, the heavy winter snows not only contributed to the slow pace of the ground offensive, they also prohibited any air support for the opening assault. Once beyond the initial bridgeheads over the Our and Sauer rivers, Third Army forces crossed a series of creeks and streams as they attempted to advance along roads made almost impassable from German use and the winter thaw. Much to Patton's pleasure, however, during the first week in February his troops made slow but steady progress.

Air operations in early February also can be characterized by one word: weather.<sup>24</sup> When the 405th and 406th Fighter Groups left the command on the eighth, they had flown on only two days in February because of poor weather. Between January 30 and February 8, fog and drizzle prohibited air support every day except on the second, when the 354th Fighter Group flew four 12-plane missions for VIII Corps. Although February's flying weather proved to be better than January's, it nevertheless restricted operations on fully 22 days of the month; 4 more days were totally nonoperational and 3 were limited to fewer than 40 combat sorties each. The command, however, gave a strong account of itself by flying a total of 5,749 sorties for an average of 205 per day in February, 500 more than it achieved in January when it possessed three more fighter-bomber groups.<sup>25</sup>

Weather caused the command to adjust flying priorities. The bad weather in the Eifel in early February forced Weyland to modify the command's top-priority program—interdiction. The basic air plan called for fighter-bombers to interdict German units attempting to reinforce the Prüm-Bitburg area from

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the east. The command historian asserted, however, that bad weather during the first 12 days of February compelled the fighter-bombers to fly armed reconnaissance missions farther east in the Rhine valley instead. Even so, XIX TAC airmen flew nearly half of their armed reconnaissance missions in the original Eifel target area. Characteristically, Weyland's pilots often disregarded minimum weather flying conditions to support a Third Army offensive.

Although interdiction was a key priority, the airmen did not neglect close air support. On February 8, 1945, the day Weyland was promoted to major general, weather allowed his fighter-bombers to provide close air support to hard-pressed XII Corps forces precariously holding their Echternach bridgehead across the Sauer River. That day the 362d Maulers and 368th Thunder Bums each flew seven missions to protect the corps' bridgehead and ward off German counterattacks. On the eighth, Third Army's active defense already found VIII Corps within a half mile of Prum and III Corps widening its bridgehead beyond the Our River north of Dasburg. Farther south, General Walker's overextended XX Corps attacked the heaviest defenses of the entire Siegfried Line southeast of Trier in what Americans termed the Saar-Mosel Triangle (**Map 22**).

Despite the horrid weather, stiff defenses, and additional units transferred away from his command, Patton's forces pressed forward. They measured their success in the number of pillboxes taken each day and in small unit penetrations of the West Wall. Even though bad weather prohibited close air support on February 12, 17, and 18, fighter-bombers covered Patton's divisions on every other day. The 362d Maulers, for example, flew every day in support of XII Corps units until the troops finally breached the Siegfried Line on February 25. For the other two corps attacks, the 354th and 368th Fighter Groups shared the close support missions until the seventeenth, when the 354th Fighter Group, now flying P-51s again, concentrated on armed reconnaissance and fighter sweeps. Then the 368th and 371st Fighter Groups picked up the army

### Ninth Air Force fighters entrenched in snow









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“cooperation” mission, or what air leaders increasingly termed close air support.<sup>26</sup>

During the West Wall assault in February, the command followed its practice of assigning specific fighter-bomber groups to cover specific army corps. That permitted the aviators to become entirely familiar with the methods of particular ground controllers and with special combat conditions in a given area. In the Eifel, the 362d Fighter Group normally supported XII Corps and the 371st Fighter Group covered XX Corps. General Weyland, however, preferred to retain flexibility in mission assignments. The VIII Corps, for example, received close air support from all but the 367th Fighter Group, which generally flew armed reconnaissance missions. Moreover, individual squadrons from the same group often supported different corps on the same day, then followed their cooperation mission with armed reconnaissance or bomber escort flights. In short, the command continued to adjust its priorities and assignments as rapidly as circumstances dictated.<sup>27</sup>

Gradually, close air support sorties began to outnumber those for armed reconnaissance/interdiction. In fact, even during the first 12 days of February, the command flew the same number of sorties for both close air support and interdiction missions. Thereafter close air support became the command's priority program until the breakthrough to Prüm on February 25. Although the statistical record does not always clearly distinguish between mission types, operational records indicate that from February 12–25, XIX TAC pilots flew 1,494 close air support and 1,315 armed reconnaissance/interdiction sorties. For the entire month of February, close support outnumbered armed reconnaissance sorties by 1,976 to 1,884. Third Army ground forces' offensive requirements meant that close air support, normally last on the doctrinal-mission priority scale, became the first and most important mission in early 1945.<sup>28</sup>

The high level of close support flying might suggest that Weyland's pilots flew many missions against the pillboxes that dominated Germany's West Wall defenses. The air commander always considered this type of target better suited to attack by army artillery or medium and heavy bombers in spite of earlier evaluations that suggested fighter-bombers armed with at least 1,000-lb. general-purpose bombs stood the best chance against this type of heavily defended target. How much effort did General Weyland accord West Wall pillboxes and river defenses? In this period of static warfare, did his fighter-bombers replace artillery against these difficult targets in the immediate battle zone? Records suggest that most close air support targets involved attacks on troop concentrations, convoys, rail yards, and fortified towns near or at the front line. In fact, when the 362d Fighter Group reported attacking a pillbox on February 16, it proved to be the only recorded occasion in the entire Siegfried Line offensive of February when command fighter-bombers struck such targets. Although General Weyland willingly gave close support requirements priority during ground offensives, he remained uncompromising about

what he deemed proper targets for his forces and Patton invariably supported him. Pillboxes and casemented guns never appeared on General Weyland's list of approved targets—unless the ground forces faced an emergency situation. He much preferred to leave these to Third Army's artillery batteries and special assault teams. Relying on previous experience in Lorraine, the airmen concentrated on repelling enemy counterattacks and protecting bridgeheads.<sup>29</sup>

In February the weakened state of the *Luftwaffe* encouraged Weyland to experiment with new tactics. Indeed, the *Luftwaffe* seldom appeared during the February attack on the Siegfried Line. During the first 12 days of the month, fighters destroyed only one plane in the air and ten on the ground. From that time until February 25, even better weather did not bring out the *Luftwaffe* in force. As a result, command claims were a modest 18 aircraft destroyed in the air and four on the ground. The *Luftwaffe*'s relative inactivity convinced Weyland to forego squadron-sized missions and initiate four-plane close air support flights, the command's major tactical adjustment for the spring of 1945. On February 20, the 371st Fighter Group flew four-plane sweeps over XX Corps divisions continuously from first light to sunset. Although the small flights had been flown occasionally in the past in lieu of the normal eight- or twelve-plane squadron mission, the 371st Fighter Group began what immediately became common practice for all close air support flying during the next three and a half weeks.<sup>30</sup>

General Weyland considered conditions especially good for using the four-plane flight. The modest *Luftwaffe* threat meant that the command could risk low-level bombing and strafing runs without the protection of a top cover flight. Flying close to the home base allowed tactical control radars to monitor the area and alert the flights should *Luftwaffe* aircraft suddenly appear. In late February, Weyland also expected the ground action to become more fluid. Under Third Army's incessant pressure, retreating enemy forces would be forced into the open, where they would become excellent targets for the airmen. In short, four-plane missions now could be flown safely and profitably. Moreover, they proved popular with airmen and field troops alike. From the air side, it meant that each flight had more time to concentrate on ground targets because they lost no time coordinating two flights working together. Then, too, the smaller formation gave new pilots practice flying as mission leaders. As for Patton's ground forces, they enjoyed what amounted to the proverbial, albeit doctrinally proscribed, air umbrella as they came and went throughout the day.

Although the airmen considered the four-plane missions more productive than the larger formations, the statistical record is not entirely clear on the issue. Indeed, the whole question of tactical air power's effectiveness as it was applied in this manner remains next to impossible to determine with precision. The ground force elements receiving this air support, however, harbored no doubts whatsoever. They judged XIX TAC aircraft as having played a crucial role in the spring offensive. Nearly every day, the flying command's intelli-

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gence reports referred to complimentary messages from ground units that received "excellent cooperation" and "splendid support" from XIX TAC fighter-bombers that blunted counterattacks or destroyed enemy positions. General Weyland, too, never entertained second doubts over his decision to supply this kind of air coverage at this point in the war. By February 20, 1945, he could look forward to mobile warfare in the near future. From previous experience in the Battle for France, he knew Patton's artillery would have difficulty advancing rapidly and providing front line coverage by itself. Command of the air permitted Weyland to take liberties with tactical air doctrine, a doctrine that favored concentrated use of air power and frowned on penny-packet combat air patrols. Use of the four-plane flight, however, demonstrated the inherent flexibility of tactical air power and the ability of the airmen to adapt to changing needs and circumstances. Although Weyland's airmen believed the small formations represented the most productive and efficient method of flying in February, a stronger enemy would have required squadron- or group-sized missions with perhaps a corresponding decline in efficiency. In short, battle conditions guided the XIX TAC commander's actions and determined the command's aerial operations.<sup>31</sup>

## Through the Eifel to the Rhine

While the aircraft conversions took place in mid-February, operationally the command continued to support Third Army's slow movement through the Siegfried Line. On February 20, 1945, with the 371st Fighter Group providing continuous four-plane coverage, XX Corps' divisions began clearing the Saar-Mosel Triangle in earnest. In two days of stiff fighting against the *Wehrmacht's* weakened Army Group G, Third Army troops secured the area, and Patton's troops poised themselves for the final drive toward Trier. Meanwhile, the 362d Fighter Group attacked convoys, tanks, and gun positions in the VIII Corps zone, where General Middleton's forces finally cleared Dasburg and eliminated the Vianden Bulge (**Map 22**).

On February 21, the 368th Fighter Group led the command in achieving a new five-group record of 504 sorties. It divided its 25 missions between XII Corps' 5th Infantry Division and units of VIII Corps just to the north, then making the Third Army's fifth complete breakthrough of the West Wall. The group also added two armed reconnaissance missions in the Rhine valley for good measure. As for the other groups, the 362d and 367th Fighter Groups flew armed reconnaissance/interdiction missions east of the Rhine as far as Wuerzburg, while the 371st Fighter Group continued its support of XX Corps' mopping up operation southwest of Trier.

February 22 proved to be a more important flying day, even though morning fog grounded General Weyland's aircraft until midday and limited the

## The Final Offensive

command to 33 missions and 358 sorties. On this day the command participated in Operation Clarion, one of the greatest air shows of the war. For Clarion, SHAEF planned a massive, theaterwide air assault on Germany's key rail and water transportation network launched in conjunction with Operation Grenade, Ninth Army's two-week delayed drive to the Rhine. On the twenty-second, more than 8,000 Allied aircraft dropped 8,500 tons of bombs on more than 200 German targets. The day's claims included 15 locomotives, 404 railroad cars, 16 barges, 44 buildings, 18 marshaling yards, 78 rail cuts, and 65 *Luftwaffe* aircraft shot down.<sup>32</sup> In Clarion, XIX TAC escorted 25 formations of medium bombers attacking bridges and marshaling yards east and west of the Rhine in front of Third Army. At the same time, Weyland ensured Patton's

### Dicing shot of Saarburg, Germany



## Air Power for Patton's Army

front line ground units received sufficient air cover. The 368th Fighter Group flew just one squadron-sized mission for VIII Corps, while the 362d Fighter Group flew two missions for XX Corps and one for XII Corps. The fighter-bombers also flew armed reconnaissance in conjunction with the bomber escort missions, once they made sure their big brothers were safe.

Allied planners hoped that the disruption produced in one day by Operation Clarion would overwhelm German railway repair capabilities and force the enemy to rely temporarily on motor transport. Their assessment proved absolutely correct. German vehicles clogged the roadways on February 23, making themselves ideal targets for the fighter-bombers. While the 368th and 371st Fighter Groups provided what Third Army leaders termed splendid air cooperation, the other three groups flew armed reconnaissance in the Rhine region and eastward along key communications routes. A final total of 269 tanks and armored vehicles and 1,308 railroad cars represented a command record for the number of enemy vehicles claimed destroyed or damaged in a single day. The total of 527 sorties flown surpassed the month's previous high set just two days earlier.<sup>33</sup>

A few days later, on February 25, 1945, Third Army forces were completely through the Siegfried Line; on the twenty-sixth Bitburg fell to XII Corps' 4th Armored Division. With the West Wall defenses breached, the time had arrived for General Patton to exploit his position, provided he could convince reluctant superiors that a Third Army offensive had the best chance against the enemy. Yet Allied attention in late February still focused on the northern sector where, under Montgomery's command, General Simpson's Ninth Army had crossed the Roer River and began the drive to the Ruhr (**Map 31**). The Eifel remained a secondary front. Patton wanted to drive his army forward, seizing every opportunity that promised rapid gains. His immediate objective became the city of Trier. In Versailles, General Eisenhower remained unconvinced that a major thrust should occur in the Eifel. Then, on February 25, General Bradley arrived at Third Army's Luxembourg City headquarters and notified Patton to cease attacking and prepare to designate and hold one infantry and one armored division as SHAEF reserves. Appalled, General Patton, his corps commanders, and his air commander importuned Bradley otherwise. Weyland expressed the frustration felt by all in his diary that evening:

If this episode could be truly written up, it would be a remarkable historical occasion. An Army commander, Tactical Air Commander, and 3 corps commanders pleading for permission to continue to fight against the German Army they had defeated!<sup>34</sup>

Their entreaties caused Bradley to relent and, perhaps contrary to the orders he received, to allow Patton to proceed against Trier, but under severe

## The Final Offensive

time limits for use of the 10th Armored Division. Originally assigned to SHAEF reserve, the division was on loan to Patton only until that day, February 25. During the conference at Luxembourg City, Bradley agreed to extend the loan of the 10th Division for another 48 hours. Meanwhile, 4th Armored Division spearheads, which led the way, were gaining up to ten miles a day as pressure mounted on both Bitburg and Trier. Three days later, at the end of February, Bitburg was cleared, and elements of the 76th Infantry Division were within three miles of Trier. Direct air support for the offensive continued to come primarily from the 368th and 371st Fighter Groups, while the other groups flew armed reconnaissance along the Rhine.<sup>35</sup>

With Third Army returned to mobile operations at the end of February 1945, the airmen looked forward to propelling its troops on to the Rhine River. Yet bad weather and the rapidity of the ground advance eventually conspired to limit the effectiveness of the air arm. During the first three days of March, however, with good weather, the 368th and 371st Fighter Groups provided excellent cooperation to XII Corps' 76th and 5th Infantry Divisions near Bitburg and to XX Corps' 10th Armored Division, which spearheaded the drive on Trier from the southwest (**Map 22**). On each of the three days close air support accounted for over half of the missions flown, and the 368th Fighter Group established a new record for the command with 124 close air support sorties on March 3. Ground forces continued to shower XIX TAC pilots with praise.

By March 3, 1945, Trier had fallen and the XX and XII Corps joined forces at the Mosel River. General Patton now planned an VIII Corps attack across the Prüm River and a strike for the Rhine at Brohl, with the 11th Armored Division in the lead. The major thrust, however, would come from XII Corps, which would attack from its Kyll River bridgehead and send the 4th Armored Division racing along the north bank of the Mosel to intersect the Rhine at Andernach. Meanwhile, XX Corps would send one division north along the Mosel as far as Bernkassel while consolidating its positions around Trier (**Map 22**).<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately for the XIX TAC, the next five days repeated those of early February. Low overcast, drizzle, snow showers, and generally poor visibility grounded the air arm almost completely and Third Army began its offensive toward the Rhine without air support. Weather for the remainder of March proved generally good and, compared with February's weather, certainly offered much better flying conditions. In fact, the command flew a total of 12,427 sorties in March, the highest monthly figure for the entire campaign.<sup>37</sup>

With Operation Veritable proceeding in the north, Third Army resumed its drive to the Rhine as a part of Operation Lumberjack, which involved a coordinated assault by First and Third Armies. Lumberjack called for First Army's VII Corps, which had been protecting Ninth Army's right flank in late February, to turn toward Cologne. Once there, part of its forces would wheel



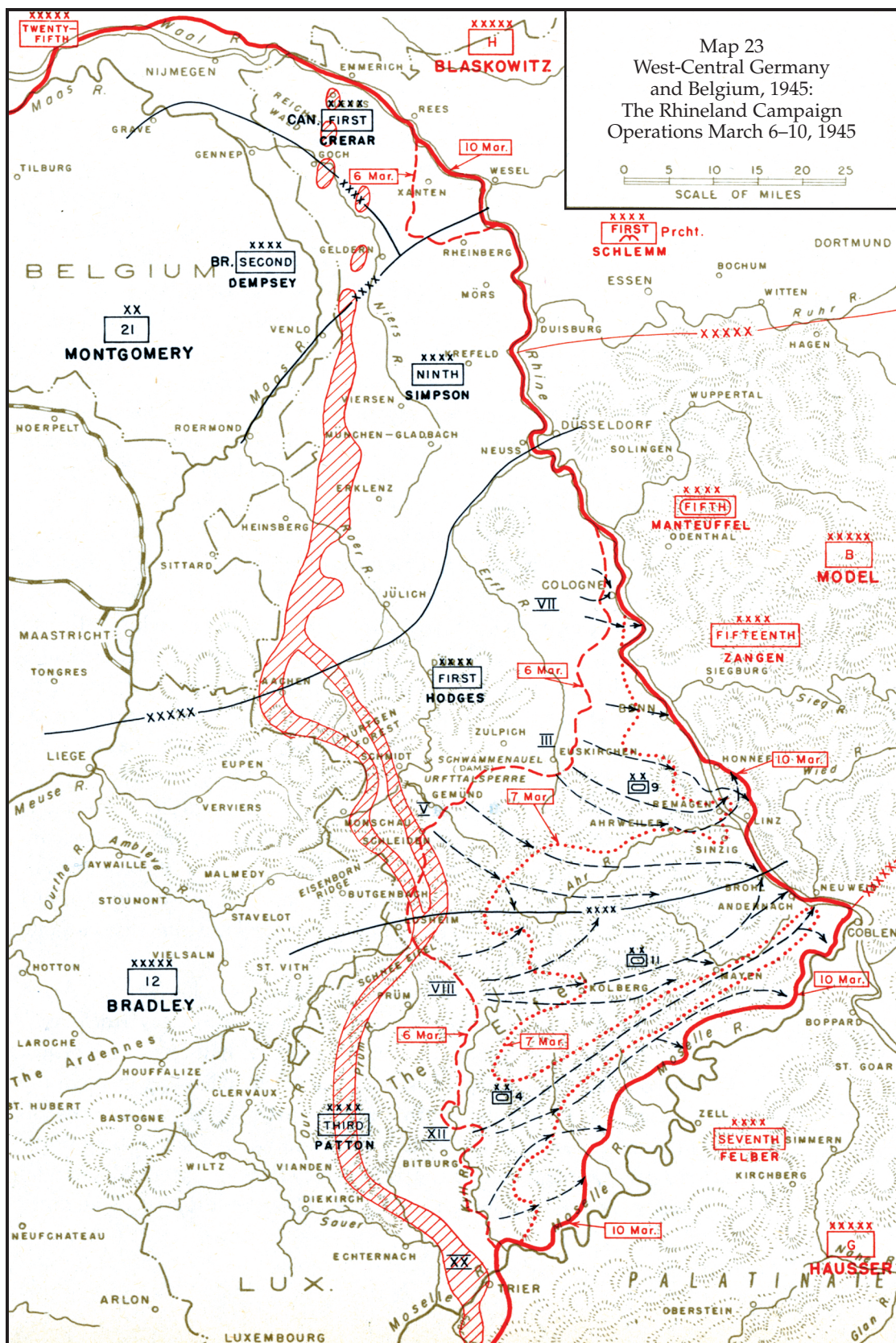
## Air Power for Patton's Army

southeast and head for the Rhine near its junction with the Ahr River, then continue south to meet Patton's forces (**Map 23**). On March 5, 1945, VII Corps forces entered the bombed-out city of Cologne and XII Corps jumped off in force on a solid 15-mile front with 4th Armored Division in the lead. Late on March 7, it was poised on the last ridge before Andernach, while remnants of nine German divisions scrambled to escape south of the Mosel or across the Rhine. The poor roads and rugged countryside now presented a greater problem to Patton's troops than did enemy resistance. On March 8, the day after First Army troops made the first Allied crossing of the Rhine at Remagen, elements of the 4th Armored Division reached Andernach, culminating an advance of 52 miles in 58 hours.<sup>38</sup> Sideline by the weather, the airmen compared the swift drive through the Eifel to the Brittany Blitz of the previous summer. With the enemy disorganized and in rapid retreat, Patton's armor could advance rapidly without benefit of air cover.

On March 9, 1945, shortly after he returned from a week's rest on the French Riviera, General Weyland met with General Patton and his staff to discuss the course ahead. Although the Third Army commander did not hide his eagerness to cross the Rhine, he decided against taking undue risks. Ultra data indicated that the Germans expected him to attempt a Rhine crossing between Niederlahnstein and Ruedesheim. As a result, after first securing the West Bank, he planned to cross the Rhine 20 miles farther south, after crossing the Mosel above Trier and ensuring protection of his supply lines. He also requested that Weyland's fighter-bombers protect XII Corps' right flank, especially along the Mosel. The air commander immediately passed these instructions to his reconnaissance officer and Colonel Ferguson.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, the 4th Armored Division continued south along the west bank of the Rhine and moved on Coblenz in conjunction with VIII Corps forces. Infantry formations from the two corps, which had been left far behind, continued to mop up and secure territory north of the Mosel. The XIX TAC now concentrated on column cover for the armored spearheads, but it provided little cover for the infantry. The rapid pace of the armored advance created a "series of pockets too small to permit employment of air power" to support infantry units. Without air liaison officers or a clear separation between Patton's troops and the enemy's, Weyland chose not to fly close air support for the infantry. Instead, the fighters focused on armed reconnaissance, while tactical reconnaissance P-51s kept a close watch on the Mosel River. Although infrequent in the XIX TAC-Third Army experience, instances like this help explain why officers serving in armored divisions generally expressed much more satisfaction with XIX TAC air support than did infantry officers.<sup>40</sup>

With the ground assault gathering momentum in March, Weyland prepared to test the mobility of his command once again. He considered using Trier's airfield for two fighter-bomber groups, but that required extending the runway on both ends with pierced steel planking to achieve the needed fight-



SOURCE: Vincent J. Esposito, ed., *West Point Atlas of American Wars*, V. 2, Map 65b, (New York: Praeger, 1960)

## Air Power for Patton's Army

er-bomber length of 5,000 feet. It is unclear whether the time needed to prepare a longer runway caused the air commander to change his mind. In any event, he altered course immediately and earmarked the airfield for the 10th Photo Reconnaissance Group, whose lightly loaded aircraft did not require the longer runway. The first tactical reconnaissance squadron arrived on March 15 to provide coverage of the Mosel flank. The remainder of the group arrived on the twenty-ninth. Weyland had no immediate plans for additional airfields west of the Rhine, but he already had his sights on bases farther east in the Frankfurt area.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, by March 12, 1945, Third Army forces had eliminated all organized resistance along the western bank of the Rhine. They now prepared for a new operation that would create a disaster for Gen. Hans Felber's Seventh German Army, Operation Undertone, which centered on a drive by General Patch's Seventh Army from the Siegfried Line near Saarbruecken to the Rhine at Mainz.

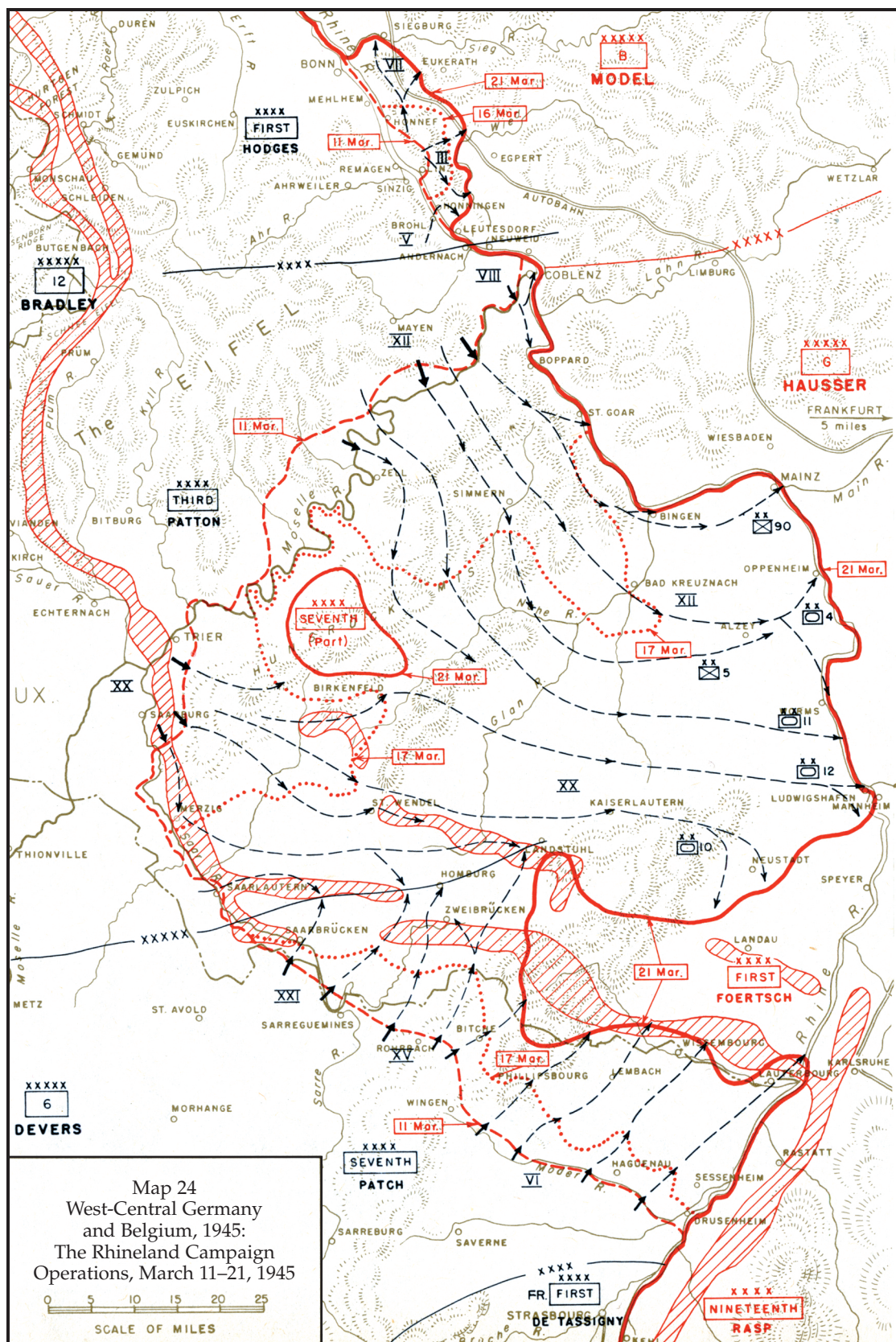
In early March 1945, General Patton passed to General Bradley an even more audacious plan, one that gave to Third Army a larger role predicated on the position achieved in its recent gains. In this plan, the 4th Armored Division would continue south along the Rhine to sever German communications and eventually link up with U.S. Seventh Army units, while other XII Corps forces would attack southeast across the lower Mosel from Coblenz to Trier. To complete the trap, XX Corps would swing southeast of Trier and strike the German First Army troops, still in the Siegfried Line defenses, from the rear. That would ease pressure on Seventh Army troops attempting to force their way through the West Wall and destroy the bulk of the German forces remaining west of the Rhine (**Map 24**).

In deciding in favor of this plan, both Generals Bradley and Patton recognized that the greater operational commitment for the Third Army would prevent its transfer either to Field Marshal Montgomery's 21st Army Group in the north or to General Devers's 6th Army Group in the south. Moreover, it was a bold, well-designed plan. If it worked, the entire German First and Seventh Armies, then positioned west of the Rhine, would be trapped between the Saar, Mosel, and Rhine rivers. Weyland hoped the good weather would permit maximum support from his fighter-bombers.<sup>42</sup>

## Springing the Saar-Mosel-Rhine Trap—and Across the Rhine River

On March 13, 1945, Patton launched his offensive with the 4th Armored Division attacking across the Mosel toward Mainz, while VIII Corps' divisions moved on Coblenz. From its Trier bridgehead, XX Corps assaulted West Wall defenses with three divisions. What the Allies termed the Saar-Mosel-Rhine trap began to close on the German First and Seventh Armies almost at





SOURCE: Vincent J. Esposito, ed., *West Point Atlas of American Wars*, V. 2, Map 66a, (New York: Praeger, 1960)

## Air Power for Patton's Army

once. Blessed with a series of good weather days for a change, the XIX TAC also began what became perhaps the most outstanding ten-day period in the command's history. Relying on proven fighter-bomber-tactical reconnaissance coordination, it would provide wall-to-wall air support that seemed limited only by the difficulty of keeping pace with the ground forces. At the same time it suffered exceedingly high aircraft losses.<sup>43</sup>

Once the morning fog cleared on March 13, the 371st Fighter Group covered the XX Corps' front near Trier throughout the day with 16, 4-plane close support missions, while the 362d Fighter Group supported both the VIII Corps and XII Corps sectors with six 8-plane and two 16-plane armed reconnaissance missions throughout the afternoon and early evening. This left the remaining three groups available to provide armed reconnaissance, to fly escort and leaflet missions, and to strike pinpoint interdiction targets. The following day, the same pattern prevailed with the 362d and 371st Fighter Groups each flying 20 close air support missions for XII and XX Corps, respectively, yet able to fly armed reconnaissance as well.

Third Army's sudden advance unhinged the entire German defensive line south of the Mosel from Trier to Coblenz. Realizing Patton's intentions, the *Wehrmacht* began a frantic mass evacuation to escape the rapidly closing trap. The resultant congestion of surface traffic reminded airmen of similar turkey shoots that had occurred in France and again late in the Ardennes Battle. In the words of one XIX TAC official, it was a "fighter-bomber's paradise." Tactical reconnaissance aircraft continued the well-established practice of spotting retreating columns and calling in fighter-bombers, then leading them to the targets. For the first time in the war, German columns, often consisting of as many as 1,000 closely packed vehicles, preferred to pull over, show the white flag, and surrender rather than risk further strafing attacks. Pilot claims of German transport destroyed were understandably high. Because the retreating columns contained little armor, the pilots normally abandoned bombs and napalm in favor of strafing and rocket attacks. Mindful of the Brittany Campaign the previous summer, they also realized that any bombs dropped would only crater the roads and slow the Allied advance. Vehicles destroyed by strafing, however, could be quickly pushed aside. The 362d and 368th Fighter Groups shared honors as "the rocket groups," and they had a "field day" against the German massed withdrawal in the XII Corps zone.<sup>44</sup>

On March 15, 1945, Weyland proudly announced that his forces had compiled the highest mission rate ever attained for a five-group command in a single day. Of the 101 missions (involving 643 sorties) flown, fully 58 were in direct support of the ground forces. Although the command did not surpass the 101 mission figure to the rest of the campaign, the daily sortie rate for a five-group command continued to climb and break existing records. On March 18, for example, the command achieved a record 714 sorties and claimed 1,022 vehicles destroyed in what Third Army officers called magnificent air cooper-

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ation. On that day alone, the 371st Fighter Group flew 144 close support sorties, while the 362d Fighter Group, which the 4th Armored Division requested by name, flew 178. Such high figures proved typical of operations from March 15–23, as German forces struggled to escape the trap. By March 18, VIII Corps had nearly cleared Coblenz, while rampaging columns of the 4th Armored Division neared Mainz and Worms and sliced through the Palatinate farther west.<sup>45</sup>

With the remaining German forces west of the Rhine facing annihilation, XIX TAC prepared to counter any effort mounted by the *Luftwaffe*. About one-third of the approximately 400 daily *Luftwaffe* sorties were directed against the Remagen bridgehead. Earlier, on March 7, elements of General Hodges's 9th Armored Division reached Remagen just south of Bonn in time to prevent German demolition teams from destroying that bridge across the Rhine. This span permitted the first Allied bridgehead on the East Bank and compelled General Eisenhower to reconsider his original plan that conceded the main thrust in northern Germany to Montgomery's forces.<sup>46</sup> Despite the *Luftwaffe*'s focus on the Remagen bridgehead, Third Army continued to report German air activity, and General Weyland's pilots eagerly sought out encounter missions. The 354th Fighter Group's P-51s gained the lion's share of enemy aircraft destroyed, but poorly piloted *Luftwaffe* aircraft proved no match for the P-47s either. On March 16, for example, the 354th and the 362d Fighter Groups accounted for 13 enemy aircraft shot down in air combat.

The command lost only one aircraft to enemy air action from March 13–24, yet its heavy air commitment during the Third Army Rhine Offensive led to a loss of 59 for the month. Only December's toll was higher, and in that

### Troops of the 90th Infantry Division crossing the Mosel River





## Air Power for Patton's Army

month the Ardennes Offensive was at its height. The command lost 34 of these 59 aircraft in the effort to spring the Saar-Mosel-Rhine trap; most were downed by flak. This is not surprising because more light flak units now joined the retreating convoys. Although the command and Ninth Air Force took great care to report aircraft losses accurately, only half of the March total is identified with flak. "Unknown" is the category cited for most of the remaining half. Other losses were incurred due to crashes and a midair collision. One must presume that enemy flak claimed the majority of aircraft lost to "unknown" causes.<sup>47</sup>

In relating losses to particular mission types, unit records show that XIX TAC lost more than twice as many aircraft on close air support missions than it did on armed reconnaissance/interdiction missions. Air force doctrine judged Priority III Close Air Support missions to be the most dangerous and least cost-effective in terms of results and losses. Pilots on armed reconnaissance and close air support missions, however, attacked remarkably similar targets, most of them trains, marshaling yards, and road convoys. In any event, low-level strafing represented the common denominator for both missions. Here the fighter-bomber was the most effective but also the most exposed to enemy surface defenses and likely to suffer high losses.<sup>48</sup>

Loss figures should be used with care when measuring the success or effectiveness of particular fighter groups. The 362d Maulers provide an example. Long considered one of the command's top groups, the Maulers

### **A tank destroyer of the 4th Armored Division crossing a treadway bridge over the Mosel River.**



## The Final Offensive

were showered with praise in the last three months of the war for their outstanding work with XII Corps' 4th Armored Division. Unfortunately, the group also lost 21 airplanes in March, one of the more unhappy records of the campaign. Little in the documentary record explains the 362d Fighter Group's high losses. Operational reports cite a variety of causes, with "unknown" and "flak" recorded approximately equally. Although the group flew close air support missions for the most part, so too did the 371st Fighter Group, which lost a mere four aircraft in March. On the other hand, former 371st Fighter Group pilot Lieutenant Burns recalled that the Maulers had a reputation for aggressive, if not occasionally reckless, flying. Its commanders, he recalled, allowed 362d pilots great latitude in flying operations. Commanders of the 371st, on the other hand, demanded that pilots avoid excessive risks. Despite the Maulers' loss rate, nothing suggests that the command viewed this group with less confidence or more concern. However high its losses, the 362d Fighter Group also claimed more unit and individual records than any other.<sup>49</sup>

The command counted aircraft losses per 1,000 sorties as its unit of measure. During February, March, and April 1945, a XIX TAC average of 5.2 aircraft lost per 1,000 sorties was the lowest for the entire campaign. If losses appear high, the command also had a high sortie rate. Colonel Hallett's Intelligence Flak Section continued to publicize all known flak locations in special reports and the daily intelligence summaries. His section also distributed photographs of flak sites, took care to brief this information to pilots, and recommended attack headings to minimize the threat. Even so, XIX TAC command lost nearly as many aircraft in April when it targeted heavily defended *Luftwaffe* airfields for a knockout blow against the remaining German air force.<sup>50</sup>

By mid-March 1945, the fast-moving U.S. First and Third Armies at the Rhine River dominated Allied discussion and planning. As Third Army's advance across the Mosel and down the West Bank of the Rhine gained momentum, Allied leaders reassessed the roles first planned for the 12th and 6th Army Groups. In a meeting with General Eisenhower at Seventh Army headquarters in Luneville on March 17, General Devers, commander of the 6th Army Group, agreed that Patton's troops could cross his group's boundary line in their quest for maximum destruction of the enemy. Patton, however, remained obsessed with crossing the Rhine before either Montgomery in the north or Devers in the south. Earlier, Eisenhower authorized only Devers's 6th Army Group to establish Rhine bridgeheads in the south, a decision that rankled Patton. With his army advancing rapidly, a Rhine crossing had become a real possibility, especially when it would upstage the slow-moving, methodical preparations of Field Marshal Montgomery in the north. On March 19, Patton got the word he wanted: General Bradley ordered him to take the river on the run. Two days later the Supreme Commander confirmed Bradley's



**Thunderbolt hits on trucks  
and railroads**



## The Final Offensive

injunction, authorizing both Third and Seventh Armies to cross whenever the opportunity presented itself. These directives, along with Ultra's confirmation of weak German defenses, were all that Patton needed.<sup>51</sup>

On March 20, 1945, while Third Army continued to harry the enemy and insured that bridging equipment would be ready for a crossing, General Weyland directed flying cooperation missions to attack German convoys frantically fleeing eastward toward Speyer, the only West Bank crossing point remaining to the enemy. That day the 362d and 371st Fighter Groups, assisted by two squadrons from the 367th Fighter Group, turned the attack on surface forces into a slaughter. Next day, on March 22, Weyland accompanied General Patton on a jeep tour that extended from Saarburg eastward well beyond Kaiserslautern. The XIX TAC commander described the enormous destruction of surface convoys from air action as "terrific," and commented on the thousands of refugees and unarmed Germans that now clogged the roads. One of the most vivid scenes occurred along the Bad Durkeim–Frankenstein road east of Kaiserslautern. Here, XX Corps headquarters reported that Allied officials witnessed the remains of an entire German division "massacred by the Air Corps." The "twisted mass of death and destruction...is so enormous that the mind cannot measure it!"<sup>52</sup>

Patton's mobile operations once again challenged the tactical air forces to keep pace with a swiftly advancing ground offensive, a challenge accentuated by the increasing distance from the flying fields. By the third week in March, the flying distance to Rhine valley targets required an hour's time in each direction for aircraft flying armored column cover, and longer for armed reconnaissance flights east of the Rhine. The tactical control center's radar

### Generals Patton, Eisenhower, and Devers



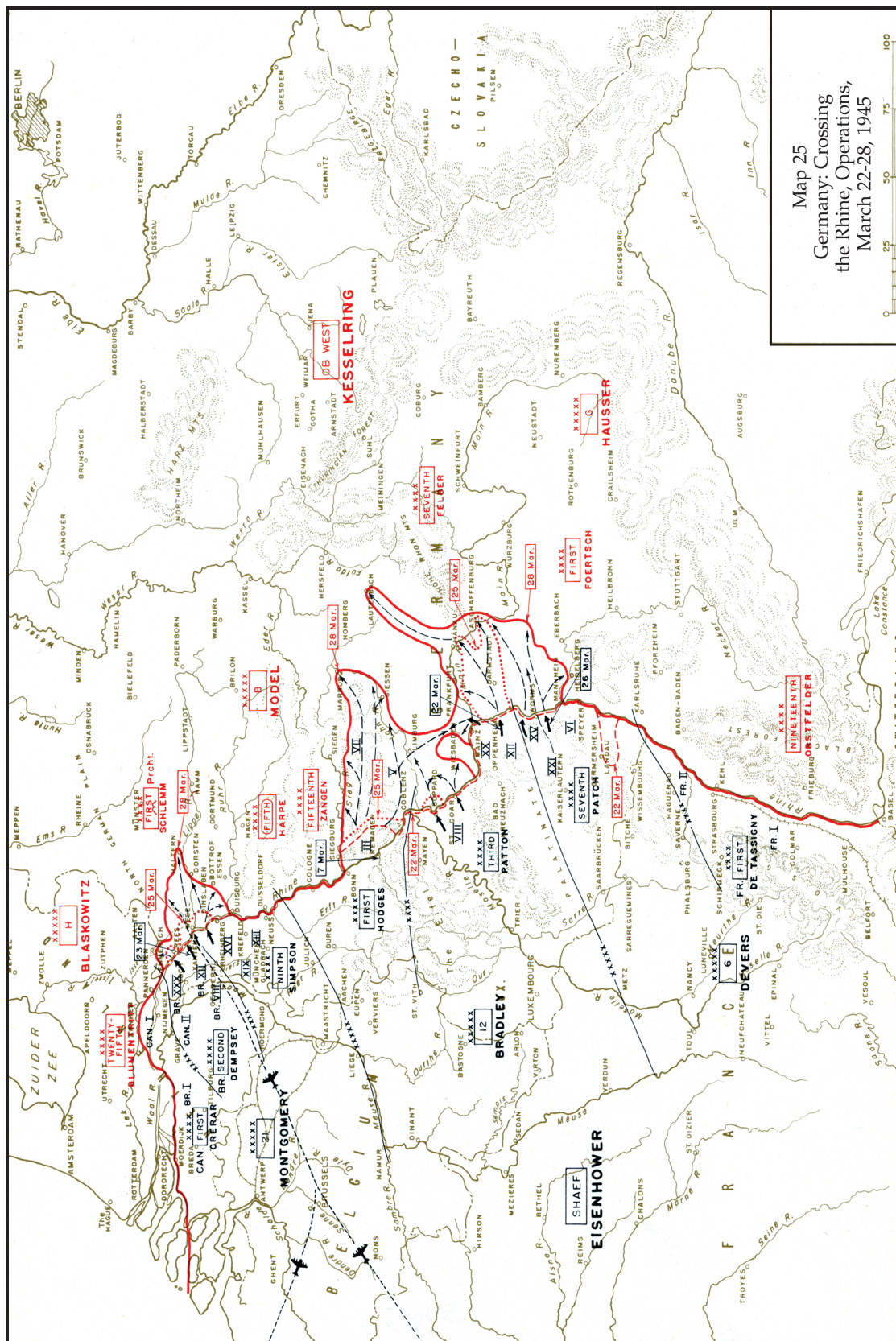
## Air Power for Patton's Army

found it increasingly difficult to keep these flights on the radar scopes, and land line communications had to be abandoned in favor of FM radio links. Even though the command believed that an emergency supply of long-range fuel tanks solved the air support problem, it is clear that shorter en route distances would have permitted significantly more loiter time in the target area. Although the fighter-bombers achieved great success interdicting a retreating enemy, if even more effort had been devoted to this mission, air power might have prevented more of the *Wehrmacht's* First and Seventh Armies from escaping across the Rhine.<sup>53</sup>

As Third Army forces approached the Rhine on March 21, General Weyland executed a well-prepared air plan to support a successful crossing. For several days, both reconnaissance aircraft and fighters flying armed reconnaissance missions kept the potential crossing area near Mainz under close observation to monitor any buildup or defensive construction. Beginning on the twenty-first, Weyland altered the reconnaissance plan to permit constant reconnaissance of the front lines. This included six missions along the Darmstadt-Frankfurt-Aschaffenburg route and five on either flank.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, armed reconnaissance/interdiction, performed primarily by the 368th and 367th Fighter Groups, focused on communications centers east of the river that might be staging sites for potential reinforcements. Although targets included important motor transportation facilities and ordnance and supply depots, the fighter-bombers targeted the railroad system in particular. The 368th and 367th Fighter Groups flew 29 squadron-sized rail-cutting missions in an arc from Limburg south to Mannheim. Claims for the two days totaled an impressive 112 rail lines severed (**Map 25**). To preclude any interference from the *Luftwaffe*, Weyland directed continuous day and night air patrols on March 22 and 23. Command P-51s flew 19 patrol missions on March 22 and 31 area cover missions on March 23, while P-61 Black Widows provided the same coverage at night. Moreover, beginning on March 21, an Allied air assault against German airfields took place all along the front, which rendered many *Luftwaffe* bases unserviceable.

Patton's forces indeed hit the river on the run, and the 5th Infantry Division crossed the Rhine near Oppenheim on the night of March 22, 1945, meeting only token opposition. The following day the *Luftwaffe* did mount a serious effort to destroy this Third Army bridgehead. Although it flew an impressive 150 fighter sorties on March 23 the Germans lost 22 aircraft in the attacks. Unlike the Rhine crossing next day, on the evening of the twenty-third, by Field Marshal Montgomery's enormous force to the north in Operation Varsity, the XIX TAC—Third Army team needed no massive air or artillery barrage preparations. Third Army's rapid offensive had destroyed any significant opposition that might have defended on the east bank of the Rhine, while fighter-bomber attacks against German forces on land and in the sky "gave General Patton confidence that no dangerous force could be brought against him."<sup>55</sup>





Map 25  
Germany: Crossing  
the Rhine Operations,  
March 22-28, 1945



### Once More: "Blitz Warfare U.S. Style"

On March 21, 1945, the day before the 5th Infantry Division crossed the Rhine and established a bridgehead at Oppenheim, General Patton told his air commander that the XIX TAC and the Third Army "have again been committing treason in reverse as we did so happily in August and September. By this I mean that instead of giving aid and comfort to the enemy, we have been giving him pain and discomfort, and doing it in a big way. Let us keep it up!"<sup>56</sup> General Weyland relayed Patton's words to his air units, adding, "XIX TAC-Third Army again is showing the world what a perfectly coordinated fighting air-ground team can do. I knew that you would be with me to a man when I assured General Patton that we would 'keep it up' with the Third Army." By the spring of 1945, the cooperative spirit established in France had spread from the leadership throughout the lower echelons of the air-ground team.<sup>57</sup>

Like the rapid dash across France, the planned drive into the heart of Germany promised to stretch the lines of communication and again challenge Weyland's forces to keep pace with the swift ground offensive. Armored column cover and armed reconnaissance would certainly be the primary missions against lucrative enemy targets on the roads. General Weyland knew that the speed of the advance once again would likely require air cover for Third Army's exposed flanks and greater reliance on reconnaissance. The air commander also realized, without the pernicious distraction of a Brittany, that the airmen did not have to protect an extended front expanding in opposite directions. Moreover, the Allies were better supplied to confront an enemy that, despite fighting on his homeland, seemed on the brink of collapse. Perhaps most important, air and ground forces both brought months of combat experience to the final offensive.

On the evening of March 23, 1945, while Field Marshal Montgomery initiated Operation Varsity in the north, featuring two entire airborne divisions leading the air assault portion of his highly publicized and elaborately prepared Rhine crossing, General Patton readied his forces for an advance from the Oppenheim bridgehead on the Rhine to the Main River, 30 miles to the northeast. The next day armored columns of the hard-driving 4th Armored Division bypassed Darmstadt and dashed toward Hanau and Aschaffenburg. On March 25, they seized bridgeheads at both of these sites on the Main River, while other XII Corps forces closed on Frankfurt. Further north, VIII Corps units made two additional Rhine crossings south of Coblenz on the twenty-fifth and moved toward Limburg on the Lahn River. General Walker's XX Corps troops crossed two days later, then moved north to join VIII Corps units and encircle Wiesbaden before driving toward Giessen and a planned link-up with First Army (**Map 25**).

## The Final Offensive

The speed and relative ease of the ground advance now owed as much to the air support provided by General Weyland's fighter-bombers as it did to enemy collapse. Good weather prevailed until March 29, when Third Army had all three army corps across the Rhine and well on their way northeast. Following past practice, General Weyland assigned a specific air group to support each of the army corps. The 367th Fighter Group's P-47s provided armored column cover for General Eddy's XII Corps pacesetters exclusively, and drew rave reviews from the corps commander. The VIII and XX Corps crossings and breakouts received air cover from the 368th and 362d Fighter Groups, respectively.

With the 367th Fighter Group leading the way, the 371st, 362d, and 368th Fighter Groups flew armed reconnaissance in front of the advancing troops as far east as Giessen and Schweinfurt. The fighter-bombers found the roads congested with German convoys fleeing eastward as Third Army's rapidly moving armored forces allowed no time for the German Seventh Army to organize defenses. On March 27, in spite of restrictive flying weather, the airmen claimed more than 1,000 motorized vehicles destroyed or damaged. Claims for March 23–28, before bad weather set in, were impressive: 3,100 vehicles, 211 locomotives, and 2,954 railroad cars. Yet the pilots eagerly looked ahead to the following month when longer days and the weatherman's promise of better weather offered prospects of the campaign's best flying.

The command's Mustangs had an equally important role. The 354th Fighter Group's P-51s flew eight-plane area cover missions over the Rhine

### Third Army crossing the Rhine River



## Air Power for Patton's Army

and Main bridgeheads, readily accepting any *Luftwaffe* challenge. Although the enemy directed its primary effort against Montgomery's forces threatening the Ruhr industrial region, its 150 sorties flown against the Oppenheim bridgehead on March 23 represented an impressive effort. It could not, however, sustain that level of response. Heavy casualties restricted its attack to 60 sorties on March 24 and all *Luftwaffe* opposition along the Rhine ended when Third Army troops overran its bases in the Frankfurt area on March 25.<sup>58</sup>

Anticipating a wide front and extremely fluid situation in the weeks ahead, the XIX TAC's 10th Photo Reconnaissance Group introduced an important reconnaissance key system on March 28 to uncover potential enemy attacks. Group and Army intelligence personnel plotted 33 squares, each representing 20 square miles of territory. Planners gave each square a name, and the key allowed them to change the air-ground reconnaissance plan daily by combining two or more squares into the desired area. Once Third Army overran the squares, a new base line would be established and the key moved over it. Coverage could be changed merely by a telephone call. The key system eliminated the need for providing the corps new reconnaissance overlays every day and gave tactical reconnaissance planners much greater flexibility.<sup>59</sup>

In the air-ground arena, fighter-bomber and reconnaissance pilots achieved new levels of coordination with ground forces through their tactical air liaison officers. To respond rapidly to the changing situation, tactical reconnaissance aircraft, on March 24, received permission to talk over fighter-bomber channels directly with the division air liaison officer, rather than with his counterpart at corps headquarters. The tactical control center only monitored the VHF transmissions. This procedure enabled a division to request reconnaissance directly from the pilots and, after receiving the reports, immediately divert fighter-bombers in the vicinity to any reported targets.

In this change, which decentralized air-ground operations even further, air leaders advanced another step down the road of providing dedicated air support for ground forces. To be sure, AAF air liaison officers retained operational control of the aircraft, but the change meant that fighter-bombers could be diverted by controllers at the front rather than by those in the tactical control center where the information was often outdated. It also became common practice for fighter-bombers on armed reconnaissance missions to first check with the corps air liaison officer to learn of any immediate targets before flying his assigned route. Such were the needs of mobile warfare and the pragmatic solutions that tactical air officers adopted to meet the problems they faced. Although such procedures might have proved of value in static situations, air leaders in those circumstances preferred to rely on more traditional methods of centralized control.<sup>60</sup>

While Weyland, in late March 1945, considered the challenge of moving his aircraft to bases farther forward, he became aware of a Third Army opera-

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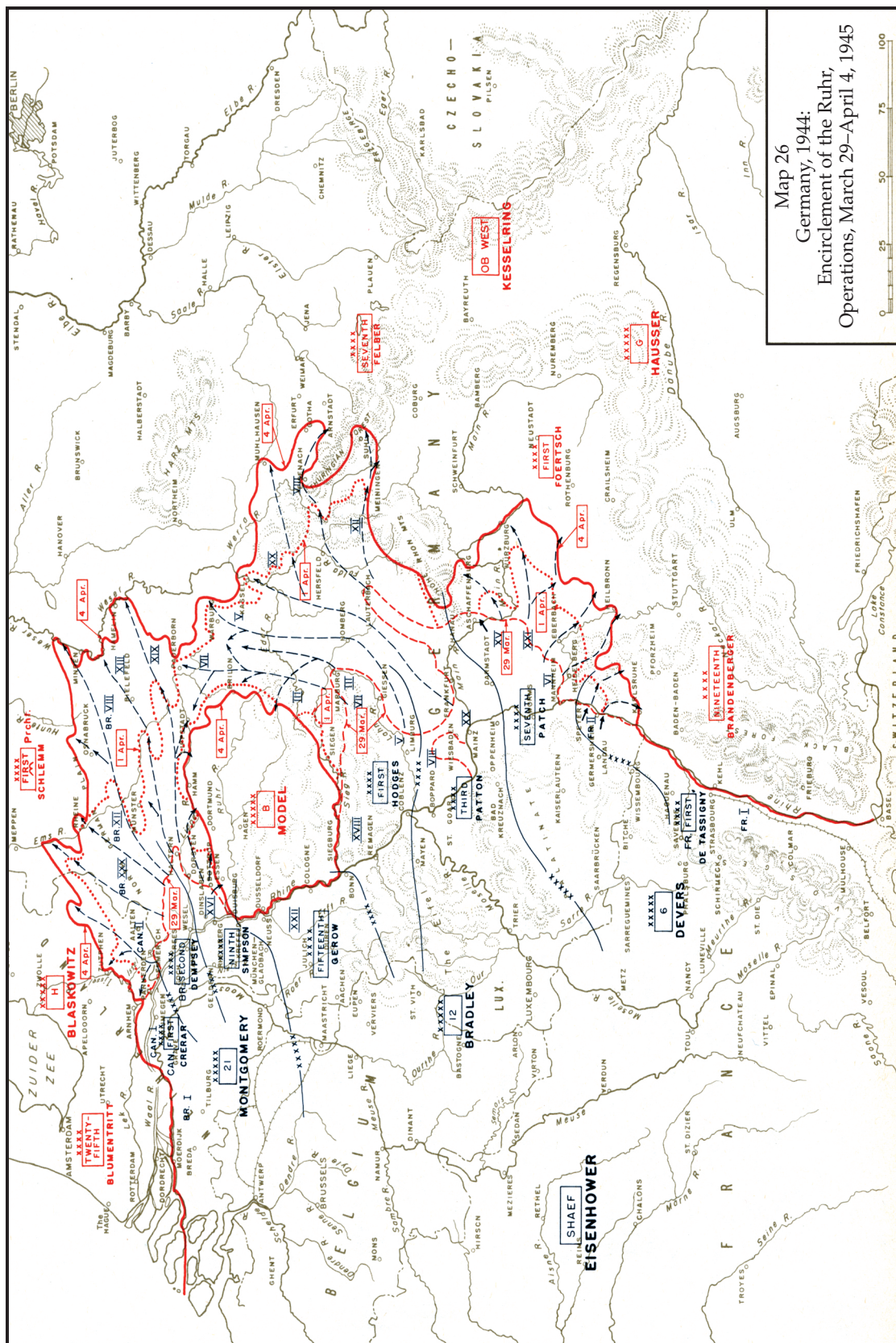
tion that proved to be one of the most controversial of General Patton's career. On March 27, a security blackout affected all activities concerning the 4th Armored Division which, as Weyland recorded in his diary, had sent a combat team of more than 300 men 50 kilometers east of Aschaffenburg to a POW camp. Rather than send a large, heavily defended force, Patton elected to send a small task force far behind enemy lines to liberate a camp near Hammelburg that Allied intelligence knew contained many Americans, including, most likely, Patton's son-in-law, Col. John Waters. Unfortunately, a German observation plane spotted the American force as it approached the camp. Shortly after liberating many prisoners and setting out on the return journey, German forces cut off and decimated the rescue force. Critics ever since have charged that Patton, for personal reasons, recklessly jeopardized the main task force in a very risky operation of questionable value.<sup>61</sup>

Whatever the validity of these accusations, given the impressive air-ground coordination in evidence by late March 1945, one must ask why Third Army planners failed to provide for air support in this operation? Intended as a highly secret, quick-strike mission, no ground controller was assigned to the task force to call on F-6s and P-47s in case of emergency. Even the bad weather on March 29–30 would not have prevented Weyland from sending his aircraft to help. One can only speculate whether air-ground coordination would have been sufficient to save the mission. Such a contingency seems not to have been considered by Patton, who apparently planned and executed the operation without consulting his air commander.

While General Patton dealt with the abortive rescue mission, his three rampaging armored divisions pushed northeastward deeper into Germany. Typically, 4th Armored Division led the assault. By March 31, its forward elements approached the Fulda River, more than 100 miles northeast of their Rhine bridgehead. Indeed, by the end of the month, Third Army had cleared the Rhein-Main triangle and had linked up with First and Seventh Armies on its flanks. Meanwhile, after crossing the Rhine in force, Montgomery prepared to lead the Allied assault to the Elbe, then on to Berlin. To his profound displeasure, Eisenhower decided to shift the main effort in the north from Montgomery's to Bradley's group, thereby de-emphasizing the drive toward Berlin. By month's end, the unhappy field marshal would lose Simpson's Ninth Army to Bradley's 12th Army Group and occupy a supporting role guarding Bradley's northern flank (**Map 26**).<sup>62</sup>

As the Third Army advance continued, General Weyland acted promptly to bring his own command forward. When Third Army moved its command post on March 27, from Luxembourg City to Idar-Oberstein, 30 miles east of Trier, the air commander sent along his X-Ray liaison detachment, again directed by Weyland's chief of staff Colonel Browne. In this manner, the air arm maintained close coordination with General Patton until the XIX TAC advance headquarters arrived. This occurred shortly thereafter, when Weyland





SOURCE: Vincent J. Esposito, ed., *West Point Atlas of American Wars*, V. 2, Map 69, (New York: Praeger, 1960)

## The Final Offensive

sent the advance elements to Oberstein in two echelons to maintain communications and operational continuity. By the end of the month, advance headquarters operated from Oberstein, and rear headquarters personnel began moving from Chalons to Luxembourg City.<sup>63</sup>

Moving the flying groups forward proved more difficult. At the Third Army morning briefing on March 26, General Weyland learned that the ground forces had already liberated several airfields in the Frankfurt area. He acted promptly to claim them for XIX TAC. That same day he conferred with his chief of staff for operations, Colonel Ferguson, and his chief engineer, Colonel Smyser, who continued as commander of the IX Engineer Command's 2d Brigade. Weyland had an experienced team facing a familiar challenge.<sup>64</sup> Both the engineers and the operations officers wanted to base the groups in a cluster of airfields, which would maximize command and control and ease the burden of maintenance and supply. On the other hand, in view of the speed of the ground offensive, the engineers decided that they would improve existing German sod and hard-surfaced airfields rather than build new ones. General Weyland willingly accepted the use of British steel-meshed track for surfacing instead of the heavier American pierced steel-plank to accelerate the conversion of German fields.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, Weyland tried to operate from fields east of the Rhine the very next day (March 27), even though the city of Frankfurt remained unsecured. He realized the futility of his effort when he visited two of the airfields and examined the condition of the runways. The Rhein-Main field south of Frankfurt had been damaged the most, and engineers optimistically estimated that at least two weeks of work would be required before flying groups could move in. General Weyland contented himself with making sure the three Frankfurt sites would go to XIX TAC. On the morning of March 27, after first clarifying the rapidly changing army group boundaries to make sure the airfields remained within Third Army's jurisdiction, he called General Vandenberg to protect his "air interests." The next day, Ninth Air Force approved the three airfields in the vicinity of Frankfurt for use by the XIX TAC, and by month's end, the mobility planners were hard at work preparing for the imminent move.<sup>66</sup>

## Defeat of the *Luftwaffe*

Once General Eisenhower decided, on March 28, 1945, to shift the locus of the Allied thrust to General Bradley's 12th Army Group's central position, the forces of Bradley and Montgomery had encircled and overrun the Ruhr. This change meant downgrading the priority assigned to Montgomery's area, much to the dismay of the British field marshal, and it bespoke Eisenhower's

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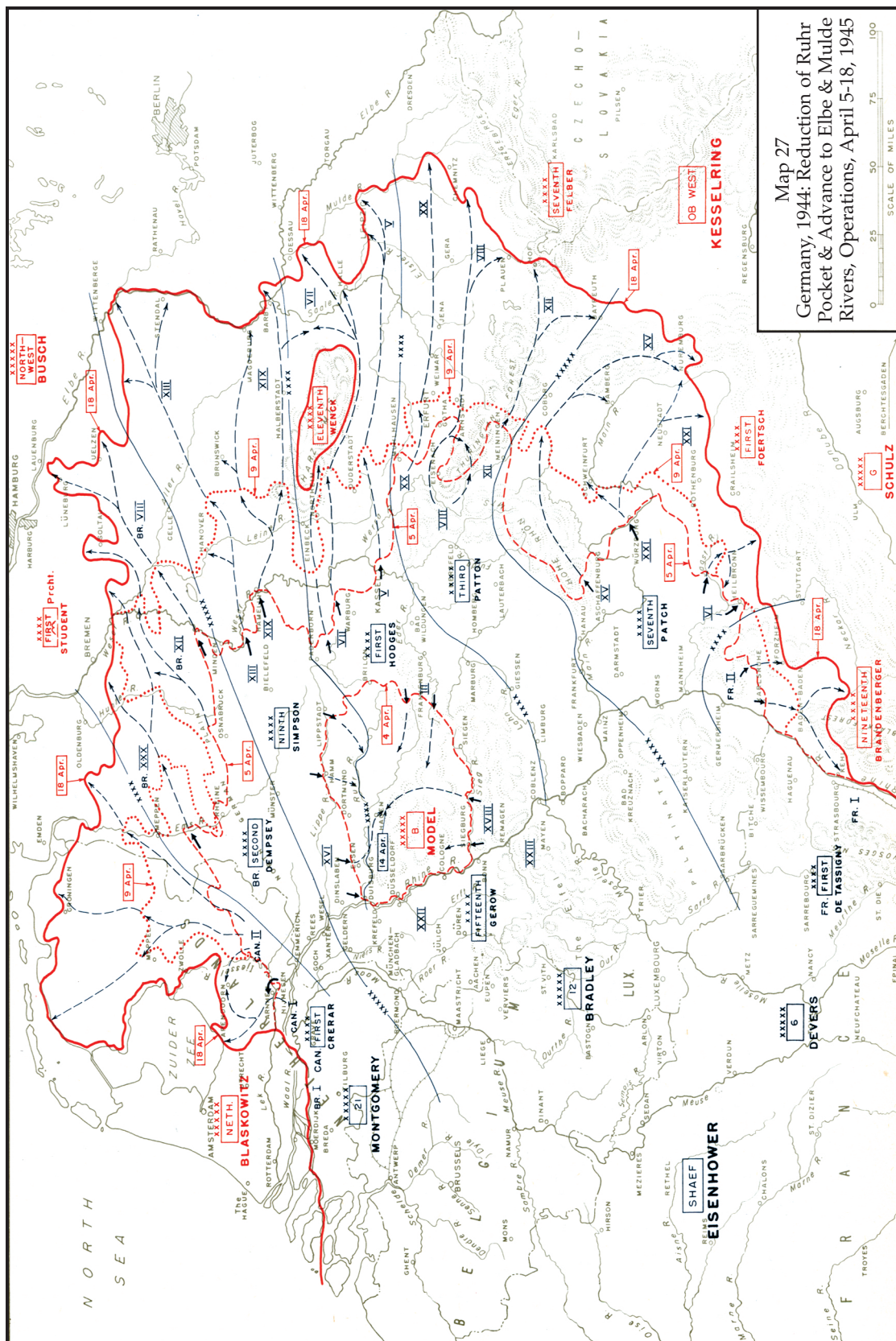
commitment to a broad-front offensive all along the line. Third Army forces continued to advance at a breakneck pace, out in front of the other Allied armies: they cleared Gotha, Kassel, and Mulhausen on April 4 and Eisenach and Meiningen on the fifth. Supported by its tactical air force, Third Army's thrust into Germany in early April reminded the XIX TAC historian of the sweep through France the previous August (**Map 26**).<sup>67</sup> Eisenhower's broad-front strategy, however, did not mean an offensive free-for-all. Now, with his armor moving into good tank country on the Thuringian plain, Patton had to rein in his army and hold his forces in position, at least until General Hodges's First Army troops caught up. If, in the north, the British field marshal resented Eisenhower's strategy, in the south, the Third Army commander chafed under restrictions that held him in place (**Map 27**).<sup>68</sup>

During the drive northeast in early April, General Weyland maintained his close air support assignments. For the first eight days of the month, the 367th Fighter Group flew 87, eight-plane missions (including 513 sorties) in support of XII Corps despite bad weather on three of the days. With the exception of two missions on April 6 for VIII Corps troops clearing Eisenach, the 367th Fighter Group flew every mission for General Eddy's troops. Likewise, the 362d Maulers flew every day during the period exclusively for General Walker's XX Corps. The 362d Fighter Group played a key role in blunting the only serious German counterattack of the final weeks at Mulhausen.<sup>69</sup> On April 5, armored elements of XX Corps' 6th Armored Division cleared the town of Mulhausen, 20 miles north of Eisenach, freeing 4,000 British POWs in the process. Then German forces counterattacked two days later, and for two days the fighting raged fiercely.

In the emergency, General Weyland elected to maintain dedicated support for the XX Corps and armed reconnaissance in advance of the forward elements, which meant that the 362d Fighter Group alone dealt with the German counterattacking forces. During a two-day period, it flew 22 close air support missions (including 264 sorties) for the corps, achieving impressive results. On April 7, for example, corps officers on the scene credited the 362d with destroying 69 armored and 173 motorized vehicles. The best measure of its achievement, however, came from Maj. Gen. Robert W. Grow, commander of the 6th Armored Division, who claimed his division received the "finest air cooperation in its history." The Mulhausen counterattack proved to be the only significant effort the *Wehrmacht* mounted against Third Army in April.<sup>70</sup>

*Luftwaffe* remnants, too, reeled under the constant pressure of the air and ground assault. The XIX TAC set the tone for the month on April 1, when two fighter groups, the 367th and 371st, attacked two German airfields and claimed 39 enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground and another 38 damaged. Next day, two P-51s on a weather reconnaissance mission dispersed a formation they estimated at more than 90 FW 190s and Bf 109s after shooting down







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two with no losses to themselves. Together with other air encounters the next day, XIX TAC fighters claimed a total of 17 *Luftwaffe* planes destroyed and five damaged with a loss of only one P-47.

General Weyland considered the final destruction of the *Luftwaffe* in the Third Army operational area the command's major achievement during April. During the month his fighters engaged the *Luftwaffe* every day but one, while simultaneously maintaining consistent assaults on *Luftwaffe* bases. As the month progressed, the *Luftwaffe* found itself unable to find a safe haven for its aircraft. Third Army units continued to overrun airfields at an alarming rate on the ground, and in the air Weyland's fighter-bombers left no airfield free from attack. Together with the ever-growing shortage of aviation fuel, the *Luftwaffe*, which after the first of April had declined to 400 serviceable flying machines on the western front, often could mount no more than 150 sorties daily.<sup>71</sup>

The command's aggressive pilots sought combat with the *Luftwaffe* in traditional aerial encounters whenever possible. Weyland, however, became unhappy with the growing number of encounters that involved reconnaissance aircraft. Despite an existing policy that directed them to avoid combat, on April 8 reconnaissance pilots claimed ten enemy planes shot down on what the command historian touted as a "banner day." General Weyland thought otherwise, responding with terse messages to the 12th and 15th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadrons directing pilots to avoid unnecessary combat. One reconnaissance pilot even came close to a court-martial for participating in a dog fight. Despite the injunction, however, reconnaissance pilots seemed unable to avoid air combat as *Luftwaffe* pilots sought, in particular, to thwart their missions. Although the high incidence of air combat is borne out by the statistical record for April, these claims should be used with caution. The 10th Photo Group claimed 41 enemy aircraft destroyed, four probably destroyed, and nine more damaged for the confirmed price of five of its own lost.<sup>72</sup>

As part of the Allied air plan in April, General Weyland designated the *Luftwaffe* the command's primary target, with destruction of Germany's transportation system running a close second. While the 367th and 362d Fighter Groups provided close air support to ground units, all fighter groups participated in the effort to destroy the *Luftwaffe*. The 354th, 368th, and 371st Fighter Groups specialized in daily interdiction missions against a desperate, retreating enemy. Although the April figure of 9,325 motorized vehicles destroyed fell short of the 9,869 claimed in March, the figures for locomotives and railroad cars were much higher. The command considered this especially significant because of the cumulative effect on the enemy's rapidly disintegrating transportation system.<sup>73</sup>

While his forces continued to lead the way for Third Army's armored spearheads at the beginning of April 1945, Weyland oversaw the move of XIX TAC aircraft to the Frankfurt bases. On April 1, following a meeting with

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Third Army officials on the ground plan, he outlined his movement plan. His command met this timetable for the most part:<sup>74</sup>

Group	Location	Proposed Date	Actual Date
10th P/R	Ober Olm (Y-64)	ASAP	Apr 3
371st	Eschborn (Y-74)	ASAP	Apr 4
354th	Ober Olm	after Apr 15	Apr 9
362d	Rhein-Main (Y-73)	Apr 8	Apr 16
368th	Rhein-Main	Apr 15	Apr 16
367th	Eschborn	Apr 10	Apr 10

Rhein-Main airfield proved to be the only problem. Its concrete runway, severely damaged in a campaign to decimate bases housing turbojet aircraft, required constant maintenance to remain operational. The air commanders soon preferred the sod strips for their efficient drainage and consistent operation, but only after they acquired a layer of square-mesh track.

On April 3, Weyland reviewed logistic requirements for the move with Colonel Thompson, commander of the rear headquarters. They decided to request maximum airlift, which they calculated to be 100 C-47 transports for a ten-day period. That same day Weyland chaired a conference with his communications and operations officers concerning the best locations for the

**Winners and losers: P-51 of the Pioneer Mustang Group, the first plane to be serviced east of the Rhine, at a field in the Frankfurt area, in the background, destroyed FW 190 in the foreground.**



## Air Power for Patton's Army

ground radars. They decided to position the forward director post radars to ensure coverage of the airfields as well as Third Army's exposed left flank. In this regard, they chose to locate the tactical control group and the MEW radar in the vicinity of Hersfeld, over 125 miles northeast of the Frankfurt area. The distance, however, did not prove to be a problem and the command maintained good communications links throughout April.<sup>75</sup>

On April 4, 1945, General Weyland flew to Luxembourg City for another meeting on the status of the airfields. Ninth Air Force officials assured him first priority on movement and stocking the new fields. Yet, General Weyland received only five C-47s for each group for three days. Once again airfield movement required ground transport. The IX Service Command chief arranged for 60 trucks to supplement the command's vehicles. Unfortunately, during the move 27 broke down and replacements could not be found. As the 368th Fighter Group historian recounted, unit personnel used whatever transportation could be requisitioned, including captured German vehicles.<sup>76</sup>

Although this movement occurred with far less difficulty than similar moves the previous summer, supply bottlenecks and front line shortages on April 12 convinced Ninth Air Force to prohibit further movement of aerial units to the Frankfurt airfields until it gave formal approval. By then, howev-

**Generals Patton; Spaatz, Commanding General, USSTAF; Lt. Gen. James Doolittle, Commanding General, Eighth Air Force; Lt. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, commander, Ninth Air Force (behind Doolittle); and Weyland.**



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er, only the Rhein-Main airfield remained unoccupied.<sup>77</sup> With arrangements for the move to new airfields in hand, General Weyland stayed over in Luxembourg City on the fourth and the next day flew—not to Oberstein but to Frankfurt—to join the initial A party of his advance headquarters. This became the first of three headquarters moves in April. By April 10, General Weyland had his forces positioned to provide Third Army effective support when it altered its line of advance from the northeast to a more easterly direction, and headed for a bridgehead on the Elbe River and a rendezvous with Soviet forces. With his groups now operating from the Frankfurt area, Weyland already had his sights set farther east, on Nuremberg, as the next basing area for his command.<sup>78</sup>

### Advance to the Mulde River

Despite the impressive gains for Third Army and the XIX TAC during the first 10 days of April, both commanders chafed under the restraints placed on their offensive. On April 10, Patton's Third Army attacked east on a broad front with all three Corps in line (**Map 27**). In the center, VIII Corps headed toward Plauen and Chemnitz. On the left, XX Corps drove toward Jena and Dresden, while XII Corps on the right flank moved southeast in the direction of Hof and Bayreuth. Taking advantage of good flying weather, fighter-bombers supported the offensive from first to last light, and the armored forces made sweeping gains all along the front. By the thirteenth, Weyland's pilots reported the 4th Armored Division to be on the outskirts of Chemnitz, while the 6th Armored approached Altenburg and the 11th neared Bayreuth.

On April 11, 1945, Generals Eisenhower and Bradley arrived at Third Army headquarters to view captured gold reserves and visit Ohrdruf, the first concentration camp overrun by Patton's troops. Conditions at the camp shocked and disgusted Weyland and the army officers. A XIX TAC officer declared afterward that the obvious evidence of Nazi atrocities gave the airmen added incentive to redouble their efforts. At a meeting the following day Eisenhower explained to a bewildered Patton that the Third Army drive would not continue to Berlin. Berlin, Eisenhower observed, had no tactical or strategic value, and its capture would burden American troops with responsibility to care for overwhelming numbers of people. Patton objected, but he would obey. Later that evening he heard a radio broadcast that reported President Franklin Roosevelt's death. At the morning briefing on April 13, Patton told his staff that the SHAEF commander had ordered Third Army to change course and move south after securing its present objectives.<sup>79</sup>

The halt line described by General Eisenhower extended generally along the Mulde River from Leipzig to Chemnitz (**Map 27**). This had been the



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boundary line established for reconnaissance flights on April 10 by SHAEF at the start of the eastward drive. On that day, Ninth Air Force told General Weyland that tactical air would be restricted to a line running along the Mulde River from Leipzig through Chemnitz to Prague, because of "possible conflict with Russian air." Weyland, too, objected. His tactical reconnaissance aircraft had been patrolling east of the front lines every day in early April to observe possible German moves to reinforce their troops with forces drawn from the eastern front. He called General Vandenberg immediately to recommend that the area be extended eastward to the Torgau-Dresden-Prague axis, which he considered absolutely essential for reconnaissance. In this instance, the XIX TAC commander was successful in his quest.<sup>80</sup>

Operationally, good weather on the first three days of the drive east found the first fighter-bombers taking off into darkness before the last night fighter had landed. Continuing the same basic air support assignment pattern, the 371st and 362d Fighter Groups provided the majority of column cover missions for the armored forces, while the three remaining groups concentrated on interdiction targets. On April 10, the command claimed 1,075 railroad cars and 455 motor vehicles destroyed, and figures for the next two days were nearly as impressive. Even three days of restricted weather, from April 13–15, failed to halt the wholesale destruction of German transportation facilities and equipment.

The aerial assault also continued against the *Luftwaffe*. During the three-day period from April 15–17, the command targeted 18 remaining airfields in central Germany and Czechoslovakia and broke the back of the remaining *Luftwaffe*. The best results occurred on April 16, when the 367th and 368th Fighter Groups claimed 107, setting a new command record with 84 enemy aircraft destroyed and 74 damaged on the ground. The *Luftwaffe* also lost an estimated 21 that were destroyed in air combat, mostly to the 354th Pioneer Mustangs. April 16 was a big day against the *Luftwaffe* all along the front as Allied claims totaled 50 destroyed and 9 damaged in air combat and 1,000 destroyed and 581 damaged on the ground. The command also had one of its best missions involving coordination between fighter and reconnaissance aircraft. On April 16, a reconnaissance pilot led P-47s from the 371st Fighter Group to eight different targets: six trains and two marshaling yards.<sup>81</sup>

By mid-April, fighter-bombers flying close air support were normally armed only with .50-caliber ammunition for strafing. Although the low stocks of 500-lb. general-purpose bombs doubtless contributed to this choice, the shortage of bombs in April proved less severe than it did in March. In any case, just half of the fighter-bombers on close support missions carried one 500-lb. bomb, while aircraft flying armed reconnaissance received two 260-lb. fragmentation bombs. The central problem became ensuring that sufficient .50-caliber armor-piercing incendiary ammunition remain available. Once again

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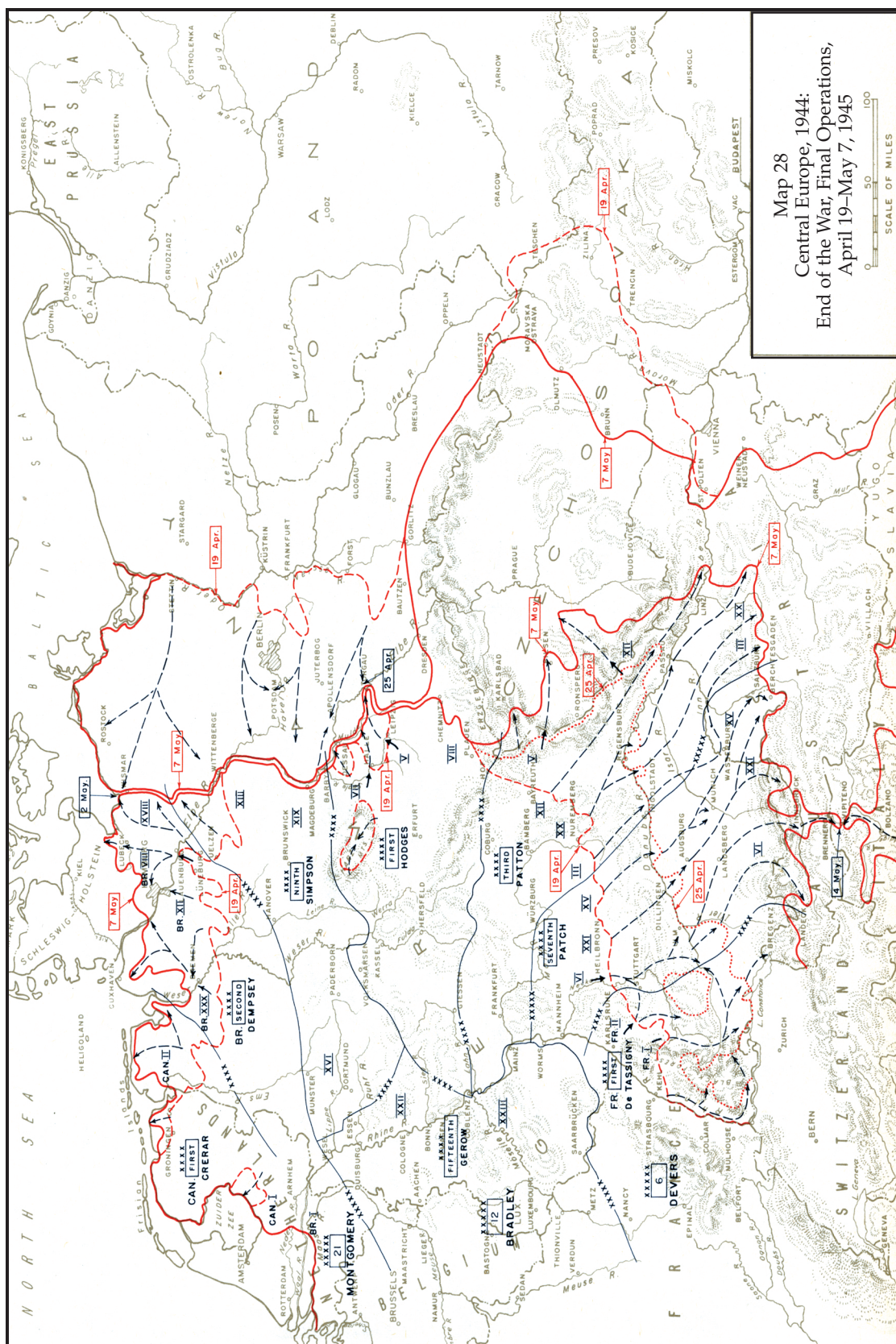
emergency resupply, this time by rail to Frankfurt, alleviated the potential shortfall.<sup>82</sup>

By April 16, 1945, with his last two fighter-bomber groups consisting of 90 aircraft in place at Frankfurt's Rhein-Main airfield, General Weyland began preparations to secure airfield sites in the vicinity of Nuremberg. He asked General Patton, who left for a meeting at SHAEF that day, to protect "our interest" in the Nuremberg airfields. In what now was routine procedure, he met with key staff members and his group commanders to work out the details of the next move as well as the next ground offensive. On April 17, Weyland attended an important conference at Third Army headquarters. He and Patton discussed the new army-air plan that called for an attack south in the direction of the so-called German National Redoubt, with the objective of isolating German resistance and linking up with Soviet forces advancing from Vienna, Austria (**Map 28**).<sup>83</sup>

The new axis of attack required conference attendees to discuss boundaries and force realignments. Third Army relinquished VIII Corps to First Army; in return it received III Corps, commanded by the aggressive Maj. Gen. James A. Van Fleet. This redeployment also involved the air command, because a portion of the command's 39 tactical air liaison officers needed to be shifted, as well. Moreover, General Weyland requested Ninth Air Force send him two additional fighter-bomber groups and another tactical reconnaissance squadron, to be based closer to the expected route of advance on Nuremberg. Although the XIX TAC commander received the units he requested, the fighter groups did not arrive until near the end of the campaign, after General Quesada could be confident he no longer needed them in the north. Their late acquisition had little impact on XIX TAC operations. The 162d Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, on the other hand, arrived from XII TAC on April 24, and helped considerably in meeting reconnaissance requirements during the drive down the Danube valley (**Map 28**).

## Down the Danube Valley to Austria

The last phase of the XIX TAC's operations against an all but defeated enemy involved effective, if routine, cover for the fast-moving ground forces and superb coordination between reconnaissance and fighter-bomber aircraft. At last, on April 17, Third Army received top priority from SHAEF for its offensive. While its newly acquired III Corps regrouped southeast of Nuremberg, XII and XX Corps, positioned between Hof and Nuremberg, jumped off toward the southeast on April 19 (**Map 28**). Aided by good air cover, the 11th Armored Division led the dash down the Naab River Valley toward Regensburg, 40 miles to the southeast. In three days' time, XII Corps, now commanded by Maj. Gen. S. Leroy Irwin, was across the Czech border



SOURCE: Vincent J. Esposito, ed., *West Point Atlas of American Wars*, V. 2, Map 71, (New York: Praeger, 1960)

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and had captured Asch. The XII Corps received support throughout this drive from its own 362d Fighter Group, while on its right, the 367th Fighter Group covered XX Corps' advance to the Danube at Regensburg. Patton's offensive proceeded rapidly against a disorganized and dispirited enemy, by now able to do little more than mount roadblocks and ambush rear echelons.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, General Weyland's fighter-bombers continued their merciless assault on German transport and especially, airfields. They bombed seven airfields on April 19 and ten the next day—their offering on Hitler's 56th birthday. Afterward the command's intelligence section estimated that the Allies had the *Luftwaffe* remnants confined largely to the Regensburg, Munich, and Prague areas, which now became key targets.<sup>85</sup>

On April 21, Patton announced that the following day the Third Army would begin a new phase of the offensive, with all three corps attacking southeast and south. Given the state of enemy defenses, he was unconcerned that only two armored divisions would lead the advance. Third Army's command post would move to Erlangen on April 22, to be closer to the action.<sup>86</sup> At the same briefing General Weyland explained his air plan to support the ground offensive, calling for armored column cover and protection of XII Corps' exposed left flank in Czechoslovakia. As it did in the watch on the Loire during the Battle of France, the command's 10th Reconnaissance Group provided the flank-cover mission. To handle the wide front and fluid situation, the group revised the key system it had introduced the previous month. Now, smooth coordination between reconnaissance aircraft, fighter-bombers, and air liaison officers was routine. In effect, the improved flexibility of the reconnaissance program enabled the 10th to provide rapid and accurate coverage 50 miles deep within Czechoslovakia along a 120-mile front.<sup>87</sup>

The 10th Reconnaissance Group's mission became easier when it relocated to Fuerth, near Nuremberg. Officially, the XIX TAC declared it operational at the new base on April 28, but its tactical reconnaissance flight echelons had begun flying with the newly arrived 162d Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron four days earlier. From Fuerth, reconnaissance aircraft could fly 50 rather than 36 missions daily nearly 100 miles closer to the front lines. In addition, during the drive down the Danube valley, the 31st Photo Squadron's F-5s (P-38s) using a new nose-mounted oblique camera mapped all of the Bavarian Redoubt region in addition to filling normal pinpoint requests and providing river reconnaissance missions.<sup>88</sup>

Only once did a possible threat emerge on Third Army's left flank, and reconnaissance pilots reacted quickly. At 8:00 a.m. on April 29, while rain and sleet limited most operations, they spotted and radioed the position of a convoy estimated at 1,000 vehicles and 30 tanks located approximately 40 miles southwest of Prague. At the Third Army briefing that morning, General Weyland declared this convoy to be the top fighter-bomber priority and



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promised to “attack with all forces as long as weather permits.” Three groups answered the call and flew more than 200 sorties in the Pilsen area against the convoy, the remnants of which sought cover, and against other targets in the region. At the end of the day, they claimed nearly 500 vehicles destroyed and reported that no more moving vehicles could be found. General Weyland recorded cryptically, “threat to Army flank considered wiped-out.”<sup>89</sup> The very next day, in an underground Berlin bunker, with Red Army artillery shells raining down on the city in a fitting *Goetterdaemmerung*, Reich's Chancellor Adolf Hitler put the barrel of a pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Germany's thousand-year Third Reich had ended in little more than one one hundredth of the allotted time promised by its demented Führer.

By the end of April, German opposition was essentially nonexistent. It soon became apparent that the National Redoubt was no more than emotional propaganda. Now Third Army numbered 540,000 men—its largest force in the European campaign—and continued to move south at will. Its forces drove across the Danube and Isar rivers on April 30. Ninety miles from Third Army's front lines XIX TAC reconnaissance pilots now reported Russian columns moving in their direction from Vienna (**Map 28**). The mobile offensive continued into May, while the XIX TAC put the destructive finishing touches on the German transport system in its zone of operations. Between April 18–30, the command claimed as destroyed or damaged a total of 3,308 motorized vehicles, 633 locomotives, and 3,730 railroad cars. Most of the attacks occurred along the Straubing-Linz and Pilsen-Prague armed reconnaissance routes, where pilots routinely reported good scores against little opposition.

The *Luftwaffe* was impotent, unable to mount more than 150–200 sorties daily throughout the entire European theater. Most occurred in Third Army's southern area as the other Allied armies gradually ended offensive operations. The command's best results occurred on April 25 and 26. On the twenty-fifth, the 371st Fighter Group attacked several remaining German-controlled airbases clogged with aircraft. When the fighter-bombers finished, command claims totaled 55 aircraft destroyed on the ground and 65 more damaged. The next day the *Luftwaffe* mounted its last significant attack in the west against Third Army forces. Pilots of XIX TAC reported they lost 18 aircraft in air combat and an additional 9 damaged, at a cost of 52 German aircraft claimed destroyed on the ground and a further 39 damaged. Ground claims for the entire Allied front were only 61 destroyed and 61 damaged. By this time, surviving *Luftwaffe* pilots seemed less intent on combat than on flying their planes to American bases in the west to escape the approaching Russians. In April, XIX TAC as a whole claimed 214 enemy aircraft vanquished in air combat, 722 destroyed on the ground, and 767 more probably damaged, against 59 losses of their own, for a total of 1,703 enemy aircraft destroyed or damaged—a number eight times greater than the March figure, previously the command's highest.<sup>90</sup>

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Yet the command bled in the process. On April 25, for example, XIX TAC lost 8 aircraft, and during Third Army's drive south, between April 18–31, its losses numbered 21 aircraft. Why so high a loss rate flying against a foe that was all but beaten? The command attributed this to an increasing concentration of flak batteries at the few remaining German airfields. The record does reflect more aircraft lost on airfield target missions as the enemy moved to reinforce its existing defenses. For the month, at least 16 XIX TAC losses can be directly associated with attacks on airfields. On the other hand, many occurred during armed reconnaissance missions against road and rail transportation targets. In such situations, it seems likely that light flak weapons became a part of the retreating convoys and, together with the traditional menace of flak rail cars, continued to pose a significant threat to the fighter-bombers. Indeed, the command's loss total for April reached 59, only 2 fewer than the previous month's total.

By late April, General Weyland's groups were operating 200 miles from their Frankfurt bases and once again facing the challenge of providing sufficient support in the target areas. Ninth Air Force solved part of the problem by assigning to Weyland's command an additional group. The 405th Fighter Group rejoined the command on April 28 and flew armed reconnaissance missions from its base at Kitzingen. A second group, the 48th Fighter Group, joined on May 1. Like the 405th, it operated from the Nuremberg area, closer to the front lines. The command continued its preference for using auxiliary fuel tanks on long missions rather than resorting to disruptive staging operations at the Nuremberg bases.

Despite the additional support, Weyland planned to bring his fighter groups forward to the Nuremberg area as quickly as possible. His advance headquarters had followed Third Army's forward command post from Hersfeld to Erlangen, 12 miles north of Nuremberg, on April 24. Three days earlier, Weyland and his operations chief, Colonel Ferguson, had visited eight airfields in the vicinity of Nuremberg to decide on suitable sites. During the remainder of April, the XIX TAC followed the same planning that had worked so well in the Frankfurt move. With the exception of the 10th Photo Reconnaissance Group, however, the command could not schedule a move of the Frankfurt-area fighter groups until early May. With the war clearly at an end, one can ask why the air commander remained intent on deploying forward once again when he could provide sufficient support in spite of the long flying distance? The available evidence suggests that SHAEF and Ninth Air Force looked ahead to securing the best deployment for a postwar occupational air force, and decided in favor of American bases located farther east.

Besides overseeing operations and redeployment of his command, as the senior airman General Weyland interviewed all captured high-ranking *Luftwaffe* officers and Allied airmen who had reached Third Army lines after escaping from POW camps. Although the German officers provided interest-

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ing impressions of the effectiveness of Allied air power, they did not offer intelligence of value for current operations. The American airmen proved different. Weyland viewed his discussions with former POWs as important both for the morale of the individuals concerned and for the information they provided on current POW locations. Many Allied prisoners had been moved farther east, and the air commander made it a point to have his tactical reconnaissance crews track down every rumor. He wanted all his pilots to be on the lookout for POW camps. He especially enjoyed sending fighters to buzz known locations, such as the Moosburg camp located near Munich. On April 18, the command had sent a P-38 escorted by P-51s from the 354th Fighter Group on a photo mission of the camp and it became a primary objective for the advancing ground forces. On April 28, Weyland dispatched four P-51s purposely to perform slow rolls over the camp, which Third Army liberated the following day. This camp contained some 27,000 American airmen, including many XIX TAC pilots.<sup>91</sup>

The end of April found both Patton and Weyland in euphoric moods—Patton because of Third Army's record-setting campaign, and Weyland because of the smooth functioning of the air-ground team. On only one occasion in the final stages of the conflict did the two commanders differ over the use of air power. On April 28, Patton asked his air commander to cut major bridges over the Danube at Passau to help isolate enemy forces and prevent possible reinforcements from crossing. General Weyland objected to a mission he considered impractical for fighter-bombers. In his opinion the four large bridges and the adverse terrain made them too difficult to destroy. General Patton deferred to his air commander, who, in turn, promised to have his reconnaissance pilots closely monitor the Passau area for potential trouble.<sup>92</sup>

The personal and professional relationship between these two commanders remained excellent. As the campaign neared completion, General Patton pondered the future with Weyland and liked nothing better than to praise the XIX TAC—Third Army team before distinguished visitors. On April 28, for instance, AAF Generals Spaatz, Doolittle, and Vandenberg visited Patton's headquarters and "received [the] full Third Army treatment." This included not only a review of the team's battlefield prowess, but also a briefing on the importance of keeping the air-ground team together for transfer to the China-Burma-India theater once the Germans surrendered.<sup>93</sup> Although General Patton often spoke to his air commander about taking on the Japanese, General Weyland recalled that, in a moment of candor, Patton confided privately, both he and General MacArthur were showmen, and the Far East had room for only one.<sup>94</sup>

### Victory

The final eight days of the European war proved to be little more than a victory parade for both air and ground forces. After Hitler's suicide on April 30, 1945, and despite his orders to German commanders to continue the war, Nazi forces simply were in no position to resist much longer. The month of May opened with Third Army units driving rapidly southeast through Austria and east toward Prague, Czechoslovakia. On May 4, when other Allied armies stood down, Patton's forces accepted the surrender of the entire 11th Panzer Division and at their commander's direction continued pressing southeast along a front that now extended more than 290 miles. White flags announcing the surrender of German forces appeared on every hand, every day. On May 8, V-E Day, ground operations ended with Third Army spearheads seven miles from Prague and 30 miles southeast of Hitler's birthplace, Linz, Austria, where appropriately, they met the Soviet Third Ukrainian Army.

For XIX TAC the final days in May proved anticlimactic. Bad weather curtailed flying. On May 2 the 386th Thunder Bums got only 16 sorties near Straubing while all sorties had to be canceled on May 5 and 6. For the remaining five days the command averaged well below 200 sorties per day. Moreover, few enemy armored vehicles and gun positions remained to attack and most missions involved strikes against routine targets such as motor transport and marshaling yards. At least the reconnaissance pilots could cover activity in the Brenner Pass, monitor the Russian advance, and search for POW camps.

On May 4, the command's fighter-bombers responded to reconnaissance reports of several thousand enemy vehicles heading eastward, away from the battle area near Linz in northern Austria. Subsequent attacks resulted in claims of 425 motorized transport and 42 horse-drawn vehicles destroyed or damaged. Action continued even after the surrender document was signed on May 8. In separate dogfights over Regensburg and near Pilsen that day, tactical reconnaissance pilots reported downing five enemy aircraft in what amounted to the last aerial combat of the war.

During the final week of the war, General Weyland continued to supervise the movement of his groups from the advance headquarters at Erlangen to the Nuremberg area. Although General Patton's command post had moved to Regensburg, Weyland remained at Erlangen and sent Colonel Browne's X-Ray detachment instead. The XIX TAC commander considered the course ahead too uncertain to warrant moving the advance headquarters again. On May 8, General Weyland flew to Wiesbaden for a conference among senior airmen to discuss redeployment, disarmament, and the occupational air force. At this meeting, he learned that he would assume command of the Ninth Air Force when General Vandenberg left for Washington later in the month.<sup>95</sup> The next day, May 9, he joined General Patton in signing victory messages to the offi-



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cers and men. Each recounted the exploits of the Third Army–XIX TAC team. Patton complimented the airmen, “our comrades...by whose side or under whose wings we have had the honor to fight.” General Weyland paid tribute to the “aggressiveness of our great comrade-at-arms.” Each commander gave special thanks to the men of his command. If Patton’s words were the more inspiring, the air commander’s were equally appropriate. Weyland concluded with an expression of appreciation to his airmen for “all that each of you has done to make possible this victory. Your prowess and devotion are a credit to our country—and there is no higher praise.”<sup>96</sup>

Throughout the final offensive, Weyland’s aerial forces demonstrated unusual ingenuity and flexibility in support of Third Army’s record-setting offensive. Although Weyland would acknowledge official AAF doctrine that decreed priorities, his priorities met Patton’s needs of the day. With air superiority in hand, interdiction and close air support requirements clearly prevailed at this stage of the war. The air plan worked. During the final offensive, Weyland and his airmen introduced four-plane flights after the Siegfried Line breakthrough, and in March they introduced the reconnaissance key system, examples of the innovation that continued to characterize air-ground operations. Most importantly, General Weyland willingly stretched doctrinal pronouncements in terms of command and control. When the air-ground team faced more fluid conditions after the Rhine crossing, air controllers and their army counterparts devised new means to decentralize control of armed reconnaissance and close air support missions in the field.

The final offensive of mobile armored warfare demanded increasingly decentralized aerial operations, unlike static positional warfare which favored more centralized command and control of air assets. It also underscored the fundamental importance of air superiority to success in military operations of this nature. The sheer size of the Allied air forces allowed Weyland to take liberties with air force doctrine to support Patton’s ground forces better, liberties that included assigning specific fighter groups to cover specific army units. Indeed, the decentralized close air support orchestrated by the XIX TAC in the spring of 1945 went far toward providing Third Army corps and divisions with their own air arm. That kind of close air support far exceeded the prescriptions laid down by the aerial authors of FM 100–20 (1943).

Weyland’s new procedures provided ground commanders with a very rapid response from the air arm. Weyland unquestionably considered the benefits in improved air-ground operations well worth the doctrinal compromise. Moreover, by this stage of the war he could rely on the experience, trust, and confidence of the air-ground team from the leaders at the top to the lowest echelons of command. As did most other commanders of tactical air forces in the Second World War, General Weyland remained ever the pragmatist. The XIX TAC’s performance in the final offensive demonstrated the soundness of his approach to providing air power for Patton’s Army.